Sathyodaya

Truth awakening

Walpola Rahula

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"Truth Awakening"

by Walpola Rahula

This is an English translation of Sathyodaya,
originally published in Sinhala.

Translated into English and compiled by
Niranjan Selvadurai

"Asāre sāramatino
sāre cāsāradassino
te sāra ṃ nādhigacchanti
micchāsankappagocarā."

In the unessential we see the essential, In the essential we see the unessential, anyone who entertains such wrong thoughts will never realise the truth.

Sārañca sārato ñatvā
asārañca asārato
te sāra ṃ adhigacchanti
sammāsankappagocarā.

What is essential we regard as essential, what is unessential we regard as unessential, anyone who entertains such right thoughts will realise the truth.

Dhammapada (Verses 11&12)

Sathyodaya

"Truth Awakening"

A series of articles teaching Buddhists how to think
by Venerable Walpola Rahula

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Sathyodaya

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Walpola Rahula Institute (WRI)

This institute operates from the premises in which Venerable Walpola Rahula lived. The idea behind the programmes run by this Institute is to put into practice the ideas forwarded by Venerable Rahula through Sathyodaya.

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Introduction

This booklet titled Truth Awakening is a translation of 'Sathyodaya' and may be introduced as the key to free thinking. By reading this book, we may acquire the necessary skill and training to think independently.

Free thinking is not an ability gained easily through habit. Proper direction and guidance is required to develop this skill. Though the physical body can be easily trained to perform a task, the same cannot be said about training the mind. Progressively cultivating human understanding and judgement through reasoning is a challenging task.

When considering the history of 'free thinking', the teaching in 'Kālāma Sutta' takes pride of place.

This Sutta instructs us to not to accept anything simply because it is based on tradition, or because it is stated in the religious scriptures, or because it was said by your teacher; accept something only if you are convinced that it is wholesome, true and right. While Kālāma Sutta provides the principle based platform for free thinking within Buddhist teaching, Sathyodaya teaches the Sri Lankan society how to put this into practice.

The original Sinhala version of this book was written during the period 1933-34 or about 85 years ago. Many false interpretations of the Buddha's teaching as well as using Buddhism for personal gain and classifying people according to their birth by the Buddhist clergy themselves, were pointed out in this book. However, the question now is whether the society has advanced beyond the misrepresentations, and falsehoods to a more progressive one based Buddha's teachings as clearly articulated 85 years ago by Venerable Rahula.

We live in a society where people ask for everything they want by making offerings to the Bodhi tree, the symbolic setting where Siddhartha Gautama let go of all attachments. It is ironic that today, we make offerings (Bodhi Puja) and an endless plethora of large-scale offerings under the guise of many names such as 'Aba-thel Puja'[1], 'Theseththa Gnana Puja'[2], 'Pichcha-mal Puja'[3], 'Dahaspethi-mal Puja[4]4, offerings to mother Goddess, offerings of flowers and fruits in such huge quantities that they

overflow from the alters they are kept on, seeking favours and benefits and reinforcing their attachments. This emphasizes an increase in ignorance, greed, and fear in our society, signaling its further decline since the 1930s; which is when 'Sathyodaya' was first compiled.

The decline in social values and norms, have an adverse impact across all facets of society. For example, a person with very low spiritual understanding and practice, and one who does not or is not able to think rationally and with objectivity cannot be expected to make ethical, socially responsible political decisions. A society devoid of ethical and righteous conduct will be a haven for corrupt politicians. In such a society, a gullible voter blinded by a false sense of patriotism and religious fervour can easily be manipulated by corrupt, self-serving politicians.

Further, if the society is averse to logical reasoning, and attempts to pass examinations, acquire business gains and achieve success by making dubious offerings rather than through self–effort; it will create a thriving market for unscrupulous practices. The recent influx of dubious yogis, soothsayers and other traders who appeal to the fears of individuals, and who claim that they can deliver success for exorbitant fees, confirms this position. Molding a Buddhist who is skillful in logical reasoning and heeds the teaching of Buddha is not only a boon to the religion, but also a benefit to the whole society. It would act as a deterrent against unscrupulous individuals from further oppressing and deceiving poor citizens.

'Sathyodaya' also has a historical significance for the role it played during the freedom struggle against British colonialism. The leaders of the Indian national campaign for freedom wished to educate the masses on the need to stand up against prejudice and injustice. They coached their people to strike a middle ground by even appreciating and acknowledging good qualities of the Colonialists. By this approach they won the support of the fair minded Britishers for their struggle.

More importantly, unhealthy and backward aspects pertaining to race, gender and culture were critically scrutinized by the Indian leaders of the freedom struggle. Rectifying the inequities of the status quo became part and parcel of the freedom struggle. Accordingly, many negative aspects deep rooted in the Indian society such as the caste system, customs relating to child marriages, subjugation of women in society and religious biases,

were confronted as part of the campaign. Thus, the Indian freedom struggle was elevated to one of nation-wide society upliftment than a mere campaign to oust colonial rulers. Some of the original aims are still to be fulfilled, but India persists with her social reform agenda even today.

A similar struggle was not apparent in Sri Lanka in her campaign for freedom. Focus was on transferring power from the British to a local group, without any concerted effort to reform the inequities in the society. Due to this failing, Sri Lanka faces setbacks even today which is not as evident as in India. Sri Lanka appears to have developed a psyche that continually seeks an "external foe" or "enemy" to lock horns with. There is a lack of will for inward appraisal of short comings in society that can lead to positive internal reform.

Sathyodaya written by Venerable Walpole Rahula appears to be the only attempt to create a fruitful dialog for internal social transformation in Sri Lanka during the period leading up to independence. Venerable Rahula moved within the community and worked among the outcastes and the less fortunate in his effort to spread this message.

Truth Awakening (Sathyodaya) invited the Buddhist society in Sri Lanka to reflect inwardly and right their own shortcomings and move forward as a Nation rather than waiting in readiness to fight "western conspiracies", "Muslim incursions" and "Tamil enemies".

A guide to practice Sathyodaya

According to Buddha's teaching, any mediation done without compassion and loving kindness will not bring forth wholesome results. Hence the Buddhist focus should be on winning without creating a loser. Any victory gained by producing a loser or an accused will be incomplete and temporary. This counsel should be clearly borne in mind when reading Sathyodaya.

A monk who relies on the caste system may do so for several reasons. He may lack the reasoning skills and the understanding needed to analyse the situation objectively. Alternatively, he may be fearful of opposing the traditional views embedded in the society he lives in. Such a monk cannot be made to move away from his stance by simply confronting and accusing him. Instead the matter should be discussed with compassion and

understanding, while providing him with an opportunity to make a dignified retreat if required. A provocative approach may push him to firmly hold on to his views, without giving due consideration to reason. Having an inflexible and hostile group will be a deterrent to society upliftment.

A similar strategy may be adopted when dealing with family members who may not have adequate reasoning skills and not open to objective assessments of situations. It would be a great pity if you were to get into disagreement with them, make them unhappy or make enemies of them because of your changed outlook after reading this book. They too need to be treated with loving kindness and compassion.

The intention of this book is not to turn you into a fierce critic of societal values and practices, but to participate in transforming the society as a patient, compassionate mediator as would a bowl of dirty water ultimately becomes clean when clean water is continuously poured into it. It is only then that this book, and its teachings, penned 85 years ago, will yield fruitful results. It is recommended that you re-read this introduction after you complete reading the book.

Venerable Galkande Dhammananda

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February 2019

Acknowledgement

We remember with great appreciation Mrs. Padma Gunasekara who did the first version of the translation but sadly, who did not live to see the final result.

May she attain the ultimate bliss of Nirvana.

This translation is the sincere and dedicated work of Mr. Niranjan Selvadurai, who lives in Sydney, Australia and dear friend to us at the WRI. Fluent in Sinhala and English, Mr. Selvadurai, has not only produced a scholarly translation, but also has taken great care to emulate the writing style of Ven. Rahula. One could mistakenly think that this translation was written in English by the Ven. Rahula himself. Mr. Selvadurai's effort is greatly admired and appreciated. Amongst those who assisted him in Sydney, the efforts of Mr. Daya Gonsalkorale for his review and feedback on the updated document, and Mr. Sunil de Silva, a former Attorney General of Sri Lanka for assisting with appropriate English terms for some Sinhala words and assisting with clarity of the presentation like the use of foot notes, is acknowledged.

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My appreciation also to Mr. Shamika Lakshan Rajapaksha for designing the cover, Mr. Anil Jayaweera and Graphicare staff for producing this book, and to Mr Nuwan Subasinghe, the Program Coordinator of the WRI for coordinating this very meritorious activity.

This effort has been a collective and cooperative one by many individuals, just the way my most venerate teacher, Venerable Walpola Sri

Rahula would have wished.

Galkande Dhammananda

Venerable Walpola Sri Rahula

Venerable Walpola Sri Rahula was born in the village of Walpola in Galle in 1907. He may be regarded as one of the most distinguished persons to have been born in contemporary history of Sri Lanka. From his young age, he was inclined to lead a life of intense meditation, and live in small hamlets that aided his meditation rather than live in temples as a novice. He led a life of hardship, learnt to live with minimum necessities and ventured to seek meals only by practising "pindapatha" or walking the streets with a bowl to receive food presented to him by the villagers. At the same time, he furthered his education following the ancient methods of teaching where one went to a learned teacher to learn all what the teacher knew about a particular subject and could teach a pupil on a one to one basis, before moving to another teacher to learn a different subject. This was not an easy task during Venerable Rahula's early life and amidst great difficulties, he acquired an in depth knowledge of Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit as well as English.

In 1934, Venerable Rahula completed his first degree from London University through affiliated collage in Colombo having gained entry by completing his London matriculation which was then considered as a University entrance examination. He did this without undergoing any formal education but through a painstaking process of self-education and he thus became the first Buddhist Monk to enter University and obtain a degree.

Thereafter, he obtained his Doctorate based on the research work he did on 'Some Aspects of the History of Buddhism in Ceylon'. His research work was subsequently published as a book by the title 'History of Buddhism in Ceylon'. In 1950 he won a scholarship to the Sorbonne University in Paris to undertake a post-doctoral research project on Mahayana Buddhism. In 1964 he received a Professorial appointment at the North Western University in the USA and was instrumental in chartering new direction for Buddhist education in the USA. He became the first Buddhist Monk to hold a professorial chair in the Western world. He has written extensively about Buddhism in English, French and Sinhalese. He

wrote several books with the most famous being the book What the Buddha Taught which has since been translated to twelve languages.

In 1966, at the invitation of the Government of Sri Lanka he accepted the position of Vice Chancellor of Vidyodaya University which is now known as the Sri Jayawardenapura University, and worked tirelessly to establish the university as a modern tertiary teaching institution. This he did by sending academics from the university to other renowned universities for their post graduate studies and inviting learned academics from other reputed universities in the world to take up temporary teaching positions in his university.

Besides his pioneering work at the Vidyodaya university, in 1980s decade, Venerable Rahula was instrumental in setting up the new university named 'Buddhist and Pali University in Sri Lanka.

Venerable Rahula's contribution was not limited to revitalising Buddhist education. He was a leading advocate for social upliftment of the less fortunate. In the 1940s he was also at the forefront of the struggle for introducing free education in Sri Lanka.

During the period of these struggles, he was instrumental of shaping the philosophy that promoted by Buddhist Monks of the Vidyalankara Pirivena (monastic education center) that Buddhist Monks should be playing a leading role in advocacy of solutions for social and societal issues faced by the down trodden, voiceless sections of the society and not remain silent on such issues restricting themselves to religious work in temples. Venerable Rahula advocated this point of view in his publication "The Heritage of a Bhikkhu". In this book, it is very clear that he did not advocate any Buddhist Monk to either be associated with political parties or engage in action to enter politics and gain political power for themselves.

His advocacy was that Buddhist Monks should be engaged in social issues impacting the less fortunate but do so selflessly without discriminating any person on the basis of divisive criteria like nationality, caste etc. He believed that Buddhist Monks had a duty to play a role in guiding the political consciousness of the people.

Venerable Walpola Sri Rahula received many recognitions and awards from several countries for his outstanding work as a Buddhist humanist, a

scholar and a pioneering educationist. He was awarded several titles during his lifetime. The highest honorary title, Tripiṭhaka vāgīshvarā cārya (Supreme Master of Buddhist Scriptures), was given him by Sri Kalyani Samagri Sangha-sabha (the Chapter of the Sangha in Sri Lanka) in 1965, with the qualification Sri (Gracious), a title held by only two or three scholars in Sri Lanka.

On September 18th 1997, Venerable Walpola Sri Rahula passed away while residing in Jayawardenapura Kotte, Sri Lanka. In line with his last will, he was cremated at the closest cemetery to where he lived and within 24 hours of his passing. He had specifically forbidden any functions or speeches and instructed that only religious rights for a departed person should be conducted in a very simple manner at his funeral.

Amongst his publications are the following

- Le Compendium de la Super-Doctrine (Philosophie) (Abhidhamma Samuccaya) D'sanga, (The annotated translation of the 4th century Sanskrit Mahayana treatise of Asanga).
- What the Buddha Taught
- History of Buddhism in Ceylon: The Anuradhapura period, 3rd Century BC–10th Century AD (1966)
- The Heritage of the Bhikkhu: A Short History of the Bhikkhu in Educational, Cultural, Social and Political Life
- Zen and the Taming of the Bull: Towards the Definition of Buddhist Thought
- Humour in Pali Literature and Other Essays

Author's Message

(Message written by Ven. Walpola Rahula for the first publication of the Sathyodaya in 1992)

The seven chapters of this book were originally written and published in sequence as leaflets titled Sathyodaya Pathrika between December 1933 and September 1934. These leaflets were distributed free of charge, and all the expenses were met by Mr Richmond Dharmasena of J D Fernando & Company, Mr U R Fernando and Mr W N Fernando from Wellawatta, Mr Edmond Weerakoon from Dematagoda and Ms E L Kariyawasam from Galle and the Colombo Book Printers and Publishers. I gratefully appreciate and thank them all.

One person who read those leaflets at that time was the poet Mr G H Perera from Boralasgamuwa, and stated "Rahula Hamuduruwo (Venerable Rahula) has taught us to think". The ideas and critiques in this booklet written about 60 years ago are even more necessary, and timely than when it was initially written. At that time there was no Ministry for the Buddha Sasana. People practiced the religion in freedom. Dasa Sil Matha used to practice freely around the country. Today, they are taken for Bodhi Pūjā under Police protection.[5]

As the poet G H Perera stated, this document is indeed one that is meant to teach readers to think.

Walpola Rahula

5th Nov. 1992

Kethumathi

Buddhist Institute Avenue

Kotte.

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1.
Proper offering to the Buddha

Reader: It is claimed that you are against the practice of making offerings to the Buddha (Buddha Pūjā). It is no secret that this has become a subject of much controversy in the country. Please clarify your view on this matter.

Author: On the contrary I am not against 'Buddha Pūjā'. Infact I am a strong supporter of this practice. There is no person more suitable than the Buddha to receive such offerings that may be classified into two types - offerings that are material in nature (Āmisa Pūjā) and offerings that are practice-based (Prathipaththi Pūjā).

Many Buddhists today, do not conduct 'Buddha Pūjā' in an appropriate manner. Various distasteful activities are currently staged under the noble banner 'Buddha Pūjā'. They include performing acrobatics in the temple premises, conducting processions with comical entertainment thrown in, and placing food in front of statues. These are not offerings befitting the Buddha.

Reader: What I implied by Buddha Pūjā is placing various items of foods in front of a Buddha statue. This has been one of our customs over many generations. Are you against it?

Author: My position differs from the accepted view in the country today.

Reader: What is it?

Author: That it is not a Buddha Pūjā.

Reader: Your position is dangerous and threatening. It is a wrong view.

Author: My friend, do not be upset or angry. When an unfamiliar opinion is being expressed on an issue, please listen with patience and compassion. If you can contribute to the discussion calmly within the limits of decency, then in my opinion, that ‘Buddha Pūjā’ is more laudable than placing food and drink in front of a Buddha statue. Think about what I say wisely.

There is a practice of offering food to a dead relative. The general belief among the people is that the food will satisfy the hunger of the departed relative, who may now exist as a hungry ghost (Pretha) in a lower realm. Also consider the general uproar we may encounter, if we place food in front of a statue of a national hero.

Many Buddhists place food and drinks in front of a Buddha statue and then they close the shine room door and wait outside as if to allow the spirit or the ghost of the Buddha to taste the items. Sometimes Buddhists even improvise a seat and invite the Buddha statue to occupy that seat. Thereafter water for washing the mouth, food and drink, a tooth brush, and a spittoon are also placed ready for use. Just consider how absurd such activities are.

Those who lag behind in their internal development tend to place heavy emphasis on external items such as food and drink. Food is the most fundamental need for an animal. Adult humans lacking in wisdom and virtue, frequently have a similar limited outlook.

The Buddha who was the epitome of ethical conduct (Sīla), mental discipline (Samādhi), and wisdom (Pragñā), departed over two thousand five hundred years ago. If we think that we could venerate him now by offering food items, it reflects our low moral maturity. We cannot pay our respects to him by offing him material objects for consumption. The Buddha has stressed that he should be honoured through practice-based offerings (Prathipaththi Pūjā).

Reader: Then doesn't it mean that it is unnecessary to honour the Buddha by offering alms etc.

Author: No, not so. If anyone did get a chance to offer food and drink to the Buddha, that individual was very fortunate. The Buddha too required food & drink to sustain his body like any other living being. However, that was when he was alive. We are all aware that he is no longer with us. So, it is regrettable that we cannot provide him with food or drink any more.

Reader: Is it wrong to offer food and drink to a statue while envisaging it is the living Buddha?

Author: Many people say that they honour a statue under the assumption that it is the living Buddha. I struggle to comprehend this

position.

We would have been extremely fortunate if we had an opportunity to offer medicine to the living Buddha during a sickness. However, there is no such prospect now as he is no longer among the living. But let us imagine the following situation. Some faithful person pretending that the statue is sick and prepares a bed and puts on a robe around the statue and brings it to bed. Thereafter he calls out to others announcing that the Buddha is sick and that a doctor is needed. Then he prepares medication and offers it to the statue. Wouldn't this be considered a big joke?

We need to understand that we cannot honour and treat the Buddha in the same way as we did while he was alive. Wise men need to explore how he should be honoured now.

Reader: Then what should we do in this respect?

Author: The Buddha has stated that caring for the sick is like caring for him. As we are unable to care for the Buddha in illness now, we should follow his word and care for the sick with love and compassion. This should be our offering to him.

Similarly, as we cannot offer food that would be of direct benefit to the Buddha, we should make such food offerings to the hungry. That should be the way to honour the Buddha.

Buddhists should act with wisdom. Food is necessary for a person who can consume it. Items should be given to a person who can benefit from it. We know very well that a statue does not need food.

There was a large-scale food offering made at a temple situated near a school. A significant amount of food, sufficient to feed twenty to thirty people was thrown away. There were children from impoverished back grounds attending the school, some of whom were experiencing fainting spells by 10 am in the morning due to hunger and lack of adequate food intake. But there was no one around to provide them with a meal. Food donated in the name of the Buddha was thrown away unwisely. The people were unaware that by feeding the poor children they would have been following the Buddha's word.

A person who acts wisely is a Buddhist. He should consider the context of all his actions with prudence.

Reader: It is true that a statue does not require food and the food is useful for one who consumes it. But what is more meritorious between the offering made to a statue and the food given to a destitute man?

Author: If someone performs a deed expecting merit in return, then that would be a business transaction. Any act done for benefit or gain cannot be considered a noble deed. When appreciating 'fruits of actions' (Karma Phala), it is important to understand the value and usefulness of such actions with wisdom. There is a need to distinguish between 'knowing what the fruits are' and 'desiring for the fruits'.

What do you think is more useful? Is it leaving food in front of a statue and then throwing it away or is it feeding someone hungry with loving kindness? Make your judgement wisely.

We place food before a statue with the desire to gain merit. That is craving. There is little opportunity to display compassion and loving kindness through such an act. But when feeding a destitute person, feelings of compassion and loving kindness will rise spontaneously within you.

The donor may gain in five ways, through the act of giving; namely, long life, social standing, comfort, power and wisdom. This is because all these benefits are deemed to have been given to the receiver by the donor in the first place. It is clear as crystal that a statue receiving food will not enjoy any such benefits. So, would the donor have any right to receive similar gains in return? On the otherhand there should be no such obstacle in a donor receiving the five gains if the offering was made to a hungry person.

Reader: What are your views on 'offering of lamps' (Pahan puja)?

Author: A similar analysis may be done in relation to offering of lamps. If the Buddha was living, he would have needed light to see in the darkness. His lay followers would have provided him with necessary lamps, then. But how can we provide him with light today?

There are impoverished families living in the temple neighbourhood, who have their dinner in darkness after a hard day's work. Then we have a situation where eighty-four thousand lamps are lit in the temple premises. I see no sense in this type of extravagant offerings, even if the Buddha was alive today. The Buddha would have required light sufficient for just one

person. Imagine eighty-four thousand lamps been lit around the living Buddha. Wouldn't that have been a distressing experience to him?

Lamps need to be lit appropriately at sacred sites. Sinhala Buddhists often perform imprudent acts in the name of religion.

Reader: What is your view on offering flowers and paying respects to a Buddha statue?

Author: I approve the practice of offering flowers and paying respects to a Buddha statue.

Reader: Your views contradict. I do not understand why food offering to a statue is deemed unacceptable while offering flowers and paying respects to a statue is acceptable.

Author: I will clarify my position. Even during his lifetime, one could offer flowers and worship the Buddha, even though he may have been a thousand miles away. There was no need to see him in person to pay respects to him. However, offering food to him had a different context. He needed to be present in person to accept and consume the food. Even a Buddha needs food for the sustenance of his body.

Offering flowers and worshiping the Buddha is an outward expression of our mental happiness. These sentiments have been frequently articulated by many a poetic thought that is appreciated by those with an elevated mind, as offering flowers and worshiping has no association with the physical body of the Buddha. Therefore, I see no issue in these acts being performed in front of a statue.

Reader: How come the practice of offering food to a statue has such a long tradition? Didn't even our ancient kings make offerings to the Buddha in this manner?

Author: We should not take the conduct of our kings as a yard stick for understanding the truth. There are many instances in our history, where kings having committed grave offences, resorted to performing various extravagant offerings with the intention of avoiding repercussions. While kings did have the power to rule, it would be wrong to assume that they had the wisdom to grasp Buddhist teaching.

The fear of opposing traditional customs has contributed towards the decline in our social values. Any practices we introduce today will be traditions in the next fifty to hundred years. So, should the people of the future accept our current practices unconditionally as tradition?

We need individuals with self-assurance who can turn their back on customs that they feel are inappropriate. Desire (Rāga), hate (Dvesha) and delusion (Moha) are unwholesome states that have existed for generations. Do we not attempt to get rid of them? Or, do we lovingly protect them as they are 'traditions'? There are people who suffer from hereditary diseases. Do we embrace these illnesses just because they came down the generations? Our focus must be on realising the truth rather than relying on tradition.

Reader: Then why are these practices carried down from generation to generation?

Author: These practices continue as they are used as a means of generating profit and gain.

After the founder of a spiritual teaching passes away, the priests associated with the teaching, frequently alter the 'religion' into a livelihood. Commonly, they arrange for various offerings to be made and emphasise the benefits derived from such offerings to the community. Books were written distorting the truth, claiming that such practices are consistent with the path to Nirvana.

One ignorant Buddhist devotee wished to be born into a higher caste in his next life. The monk at the temple advised him to make multiple offerings to a statue. The foolish man followed this advice.

Noting the man's gullibility, the monk said, "Devotee, despite all these offerings you are bald. What is the point in being born into a higher caste if you remain bald during your next life? Make a wish to get a good head of hair and offer 'kitul strands'[6] to the temple."

This foolish man did as he was told and the monk used the strands to tie the fence around the temple premises. This is no laughing matter as it is a factual account. It is an example of how religion is unscrupulously used for gain.

Reader: Do you say not to offer food items?

Author: No, I would never say that. I am happy to clarify my position. Each individual needs to make his/her own decision to offer or not to offer food.

If someone thinks that giving something to a destitute person with kindness and compassion is better than making offerings to a statue, he may do so. On the other hand, if someone feels that he must offer food to statues, then he may do so too for his personal peace of mind.

Reader: If we do away with our traditional customs, we should perform more beneficial deeds to honour the Buddha. What should they be?

Author: We should help the poor. We should make use of our wealth, strength and power to protect them. Buddhist teaching emphasises the need to help others.

Therefore, food should be given to the hungry. Clothes should be given to those who do not have sufficient clothes. Shelter should be provided to the homeless. The sick should be cared for with love and compassion. These are the offerings we can make to the Buddha.

Put away a fistful of rice every day, when you are cooking. Donate this collection to the poor. Buy a book from your savings for a boy who cannot afford it. If a neighbour is in darkness because he cannot buy oil for his lamp, provide him with light. This is better than lighting eighty four thousand lamps at the temple.

'Jagadupakruthirewa Buddha Pūjā

Tadapakrutistava Lokanatha, peeda'

'Help given to all beings is an offering to the Buddha (Lokanātha). If you wrong any such beings, it would be to dishonour him.'

2.
Invitation to Gods and offering to the Dhamma

Reader: Preachers representing the various Buddhist sects invite the Gods to attend their talks prior to commencement, but you don't do that. Can you explain why?

Author: I have no quarrels with the Gods. I have the highest respect for them, as well as for all human beings and animals in this world. I do not think neither humans nor Gods require any special invitation to attend Buddhist talks.

The public is usually advised of planned discourses through notices written in Sinhala. If the Gods cannot read and understand Sinhala, there is little point in them attending the talks which are delivered in Sinhala.

Sometimes these talks are announced to the local community through beating of drums and the tolling of temple bells. If the Gods present in the vicinity hear those pronouncements but do not attend the sermon as they have no special invitation, don't you think this is an expression of arrogance on their part? If you so wish, you may include a phrase such as 'this invitation is extended to Gods as well' in your notices.

There is no mention of the Gods being formally invited to any of the Buddha's discourses (Suttas). But even with no invitation, Gods may still join-in after hearing the spoken words of a preacher.

Today the delivery of a sermon is mostly a ceremonial event. A monk sits upon a well decorated podium, while the listeners sit before him on the ground. Usually some script is read-out without much explanation. The core purpose of a sermon is frequently lost if listeners are unable to comprehend and practise the teaching.

Let's assume that when walking down the street I see a man behaving in an unruly manner creating a disturbance. I call him aside and then advise him gently with kindness on how he should get on with his life. This would be an important teaching. Should I have invited the Gods to participate in this teaching as well?

Inviting Gods may be interpreted as an attempt to curry favour with the powerful and the mighty. Books promote the image of Gods as those who dine on divine food and dress in heavenly attire. This is a contributing reason for inviting Gods. There is a tendency among us to bow down not only to the rich but also to the mighty Gods. In Buddhist teaching, humans have a very special status. Only a human can become a fully enlightened Buddha. This distinction cannot be achieved by a God.

Reader: Gods are invited not because they are powerful but because they are the protectors of the 'Buddha 'Sasana'[7].

Author: This is another crucial misconception.

What is the 'Sasana'? It is not some construction made of bricks and cement.

'Buddha Sasana' signifies performing wholesome actions and refraining from unwholesome deeds. It is about cleansing the mind. It is represented by ethical conduct (Seela), mental discipline (Samadhi) and wisdom (Pragna). Virtuous practice is 'Buddha Sasana'.

Is this something tangible that the Gods can safeguard in the same way a watchman protects a land? Frequently, Gods have been unable to save from harm even temples built in their own names.

The founder of this teaching was a human being. The onus for safeguarding this teaching remains with us humans through diligent practice.

Reader: Didn't a novice monk (Samanera) named Sumana invite Gods to the hill top at Mihintalaya on the instructions of Arahath Mahinda Thera?

Author: Yes, there is such an incident recorded in our history. However, this is only a historical account. There is no reference to the Buddha 'inviting Gods' in any of the canonical scriptures (Tripitaka).

Reader: Why don't you approve offerings made to the Dharma (Dharma Puja)?

Author: There are many reasons for this position.

In the same way the term 'Buddha Pūjā' was misinterpreted, 'Dharma Pūjā' too has been falsely represented. Living in accordance to the teaching

is 'Dharma Pūjā. An offering made to a person who delivers a sermon is not ' Dharma Pūjā. The latter interpretation is a subtle attempt to alter the teaching process into a livelihood.

Making a material offering (Amisa Pūjā) soon after the delivery of a sermon, is comparable to paying a fee for a service provided. When the monk consents to the offering, he is accepting the fee. Such a practice significantly devalues the important teaching given to the listeners. The devotees may feel, "We made a satisfactory offering to the monk". In turn the monk accepting the offering may reflect, "Yes, I am happy with the offering made". Thus the ‘transaction’ is complete. But do either party focus on the importance of living in accordance to the teaching?

The person delivering the sermon should have the strength of character to emphasise that making an offering is unnecessary. He should also stress that following the teaching is the way to honour him.

There is little to suggest that ‘making an offering after a discourse’ was the norm during the teaching life of the Buddha, which spanned forty-five years. There are just two recorded instances in the Buddhist scriptures (Thripithaka). On one occasion, a person offered a garment he owned to Buddha in great faith, after listening to the Buddha’s spoken word. In another recorded incident, the ladies of a Royal palace presented Venerable Ananda with clothes, after a teaching.

Today, offering monastic requisites (Pirikara) has become an integral obligation associated with inviting a monk to deliver a sermon. What is offered appear to depend on the reputation and esteem of the monk giving the discourse. Comments such as, "Oh, such an insignificant offering is not suitable for Venerable so-and-so" are often heard. This practice is comparable to hiring a Lawyer. The bigger the reputation, the higher the fee. Due to this custom, persons with limited means are not able to invite monks of high standing.

Under the prevailing practice, a monk invited for a sermon may ‘anticipate’ an offering. The receiving the offering he may ‘judge’ whether or not the offering was suitable. I too followed this unwholesome thought process during the initial period when I did accept offerings after a discourse. I was mindful that such diversions did hinder me from providing

a teaching with a clear conscience purely for the benefit of the listeners. This is a prime reason for my refusal to accept the so called ‘Dhamma Pūjā’.

A monk known to me delivered a sermon on the first day of a new year and was presented with a valuable clock. An organiser of the event commented that the monk was given a worthwhile offering to commence the year. The suggestion here is that the monk’s first transaction for the year was a profitable one. On another occasion, this monk was invited to deliver a sermon and was asked what he would like as an offering. The monk mentioned that he did not possess an umbrella. He was given an umbrella after the sermon. The monk later reflected, "I would not have received the umbrella if I did not give the discourse. It was like getting paid for some work I did".

A person who had invited a monk for a sermon, once confided in me that the monk accepting the invitation had mentioned ‘If an offering is to be made, it would be useful have it in the form of money’. It is no secret that preaching has become a livelihood. There are certain preachers who have acquired land using funds received through the sale of ‘offerings’.

Despite the high quantity of sermons being delivered, there has been no decline in the crime rate of this country. As sermons are frequently delivered with the anticipation of acquiring some gain, the quality of teachings has dropped. This situation may be redressed by preventing offerings being made under the guise of 'Dharma Puja'. Then, those seeking only personal gain will no longer be inclined to deliver sermons. Those who continue to provide discourses will be the dedicated few, who wish to make a favourable change to the society through practice based teaching. This is my preferred outcome.

Reader: Then how can a faithful follower offer monastic requisites to a monk?

Author: I do not endorse any offerings made immediately after a sermon. However, there are many other opportunities to offer monastic requisites to a monk. This can be done at the temple, at the home of the donor or at any other suitable place.

3.
Unbecoming Practices

Let us take a closer look at our country known as the ‘island of Buddhist teaching’ (Dharmadeepa). Every week there are thousands of sermons being delivered and numerous ‘meritorious activities’ (Pinkam) being organised across the country. Almost every village has a temple. There are over thirty thousand ordained monks to provide us counsel. Yet, there appears to be very little advancement in our moral conduct. In relation to crime rate by population, our country remains in third or fourth position. Have you wondered why?

The finger of blame should not be pointed at just one party. The monks as well as the lay community should take collective responsibility for turning our religious practices upside down.

The discourses given today appear to focus on generating some private gain. This was never the Buddha’s intention. How many teaching programs are available today that provide practice-based directions for a righteous life? If a temple commences a teaching program people question its purpose. This is due the common confusion of associating various fundraising activities with ‘teaching’ (Dhamma). All teachings have one purpose; that is to guide us to live a virtuous life.

Notices announcing a teaching program frequently claim that it is to collect funds for building a temple, a library or a fence around the Bodhi tree. Isn’t this a grave mistake? Are we not debasing the principle based practices taught by the Buddha by using this teaching as a means of fundraising? Those who come over to listen to any preaching done with such false intentions have little chance of learning how to live righteously. Most may conclude the event is a mere money collection ploy. They may spend some time at the event, make a monetary contribution, and then return home. A common unpleasant spectacle is that of a preacher who completes a sermon and then remains seated until the fee is collected under name of 'Dharma Pūjā.

Often the following argument is put forward in support of this practice. Isn’t the fundraising done for the betterment of the ‘Buddha

Sasana'?

But the 'Buddha Sāsana' does not represent temples or other physical constructions. Virtuous practice is ‘Buddha Sāsana'. Money cannot buy it. Not even a thousand temples such as Maha Vihara of Anuradhapura or great shrines like Ruwanveliseya can safeguard the 'Sāsana'. During the height of Buddhism in India, there were many colossal buildings representing the religion in that country. Were these buildings able to protect the 'Sāsana' there? The ‘Sāsana' is represented by ethical conduct (Seela), mental discipline (Samādhi), and wisdom (Pragñā). It cannot be progressed through the construction of temples. Even without a single monastery (Vihara) or temple, the 'Sāsana' will thrive if people remain virtuous.

However, let us not assume that temples are totally irrelevant and are of little use. Their value needs to be understood in the correct perspective. If a temple needs to be built, we need to go about it without demeaning the Buddha’s teaching in any way. Attempting to collect funds through the sale of ‘teaching’ would be a shameful approach.

A drunken man set a trap to catch mice. He used a religious statue made of metal as a weight at one end of the trap. Though he achieved his objective, did he do the right thing? Our current practices are like this example. Whenever we organise a sale at the temple, wish to purchase bricks for a building or plan to paint the temple, we cunningly use the ‘teaching’ (Dhamma) as a ploy to attract people and funds. We may meet our immediate aim. But little do we realise that we have erred.

Another very unbecoming practice is the collection of money, while a discourse is still going on. Listeners engrossed in the teaching are continually disturbed by those passing the collection box and walking among them. Even the preacher may lose focus and composure. Unfortunately, money seems to have taken priority over teaching of the Buddha that shows us the path to Nirvana (ultimate reality). This unwholesome routine is gravely offensive to the Buddha’s doctrine and should be ignored by those listening to the discourse.

The current practice also dissuades those with limited means from attending a sermon. "We cannot even listen to a sermon, without money in

hand", is a comment frequently heard. Isn't this a result of our unwise approach?

A place of worship needs to symbolise peace and tranquillity. However, our temple sites appear to resemble theatrical arenas. There is drumming, dancing and acrobatics performed right next to the shrines. The performers frequently do their acts after indulging in liquor. Little children are engaged to recite songs inviting people to attend the sermons. Then baskets of flowers are sold at auctions. Today a 'meritorious activity' signifies money collection. If today's collection is a few rupees more than the previous collection then it is said, "This meritorious activity was more profitable than the last one." Money is the yard stick. Buddhists should refrain from attending places of worship that promote such unbecoming practices.

In our temples and Buddhist monasteries, there are items wrongly named as a 'merit boxes' (pin-petti) which are strategically placed for collecting cash. Usually there are several such boxes positioned close to Buddha statues. Sometimes a serene Buddha image in a sitting posture is looking directly at a 'merit box' place in front of it. On other occasions, the 'merit box' may be next to a Buddha statue in an upright position with an arm raised, as if requesting for a donation. Any newcomer visiting the site may mistakenly assume that the Buddha was in the habit of collecting money. These are disgraceful tactics to accumulate cash.

Fundraising is necessary for the administration and maintenance of temples. But such activities should be conducted appropriately without dishonouring the Buddha or the Dhamma. Any collection boxes should be placed at separate locations away from statues and images. Insincere attempts at fundraising under the pretext of 'teaching' are clearly unwholesome actions. There are plenty of other opportunities to achieve this objective ethically. Special sales may be arranged on an agreed date at a location not associate with worship. Donations may be canvassed from the community. Societies may be formed to conduct suitable events for fund raising. It is imperative that a person entering a temple has the freedom and peace of mind to take part in wholesome activities without any thought about money.

Both the clergy and the lay community have contributed towards the unbecoming practices in place today that demean the teachings of the Buddha. There is little emphasis on living virtuously through Dhamma practice. Instead the majority of the people focus their attention on 'Seelabbatha Paramasa'.

'Seelabbatha Paramāsa' is attachment to rites and rituals. It is the third of the ten fetters (Dasa Sanyojana) which binds beings to the cycle of rebirth. There is excessive emphasis on conducting rituals, organising pageants and festivals, adhering to customs, and performing a multitude of pujas. Ninety percent of the so called 'Buddhist practices' done today may be identified with 'Seelabbatha Paramasa'. For the ignorant and the uninformed, accepting these traditions without inquiry may be just second nature.

Do these practices yield any benefit to us? This is a matter that requires our wise consideration and reflection. It is unwise to continue with unwholesome and shameful customs which are against the teachings of the Buddha. Both monks and the lay community should work together to do away with such practices.

4.
Caste based segregation among monks

There is absolutely no place for caste-based segregation within the teaching of the Buddha. A caste system based on four social classes was prevalent during the time of the Buddha. The Buddha disregarded this perennial tradition and admitted persons from Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra backgrounds into his monastic order without any discrimination. They all shared living quarters, ate together and lived in harmony.

Suneetha the scavenger was an outcast (Panchama) from the city of Rajagaha. Due to his very low birth, he was required to avoid contact with those of higher castes and was consigned to perform the most menial tasks. He was sweeping a street when the Buddha first met him. Suneetha accepted the Buddha's invitation and joined the order.

Upali was from a low caste and a barber by profession. He came along with the Shakya princes whom he had served, and joined the monastic order. Upali was acknowledged as the pre-eminent authority among those who knew the disciplinary rules (Vinaya). Despite his low caste, he enjoyed high prestige in the community of monks. His success symbolises the glory of equality in the Buddhist community.

The Buddha stood firmly against the discriminating of persons based on caste or ethnicity. Many discourses in the 'Thripithaka' emphasise this position. However, the practice of caste based segregation is clearly prevalent among the Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. even today Sadly, the caste system appears to be more significant among the monastic community than within the lay community. It is no secret that all three Buddhist monastic sects, namely Siam, Amarapura and Ramanya, are influenced by the caste system.

The monk ordination practices adopted by Amarapura and Ramanya sects are overtly independent of caste based segregation. Yet there are many internal processes and activities within the temples that are deeply influenced by the caste system. It is well known that each temple belonging to Amarapura sect in Colombo is aligned to a specific caste identity. The

monks in the temple and the community attending the temple belong to one caste. Unfortunately, this method of segregation is spreading to the other parts of the country as well.

My emphasis is to discuss the caste based segregation traditions openly adopted by the Siam sect. This sect does not accept to its monastic order any person other than those belonging to the 'Govigama' caste. The assumption is, a person belonging to any other caste is 'lower' than someone of the 'Govigama' caste. Caste based customs may never be eliminated across all societies of this world. However, maintaining a custom within the 'Buddha Sasana' which is blatantly caste based, is a disgrace to the great teacher.

The chief monks of the Siam sect proudly proclaim themselves as the custodians of Buddhist teaching. However, continuing with a tradition which goes against the foundation of the Buddha's teaching has contributed to the collapsing of the imaginary castle representing this 'Sasana'. It pains me that the so-called protectors of the teaching are in fact destroying it. The following illustration may clarify my point of view. A speaker was explaining the existence of a certain impoverished community and the immense hardships that had to be endured by this group. The speaker stated, "These people were even willing to die so that they could make a living serving the rich." Consider the irony of 'dying in order to continue living'. This is similar to the position expressed by the leadership of the Siam sect. A key norm of Buddhist teaching is broken so that the same teaching can be safeguarded. The non-acceptance of members outside the 'Govigama' caste to the monastic order is a step towards its division and decline. Rather than protecting the Buddhist teaching, this is a transparent attempt to protect the 'Govigama' caste.

The monks put forward the argument that this tradition is based on a decree issued by a Sinhala king. But does a king's verdict overrule the Buddha's verdict? The chief monks of the Siam sect have demeaned themselves by bowing down to the judgement of a worldly king who had scant understanding of the Buddha's teaching.

During the reign of King Kalashoka in India, a group of monks attempted to introduce ten tenets into the monastic code of conduct. One of these was 'Achinna-Kappa'. This ethos pronounces, 'following or

emulating an act which come through tradition and performed earlier by a teacher or spiritual guide is acceptable'. The proposed ten tenets were rejected by the Buddhist council at the time. However, a breakaway faction known as 'Theerthaka' adopted these practices. It is unfortunate that the learned monks of the Siam sect continue to follow the 'Theerthaka' doctrine in relation to caste segregation. They are following a tradition even through it is clearly against the Buddha's teaching.

These monks assert that monastic ordination should be given to 'a son of noble birth' (Kula-putra). There are two interpretations for Kula-putra. 'Jathi Kula-puthra' refers to a son born into a high caste as acknowledged by social convention. 'Achara Kula-puthra' is a man of high moral standing and honourable conduct, irrespective of his birth status. If a person is born into a high caste is of low upbringing, he will be unsuitable for a monastic life. The decision to enter a monastic life should be based on character and conduct of the individual and not on the caste at birth.

The Siam sect's attitude towards caste systems smacks of hypocrisy. On the one hand monks refuse to ordain anyone not belonging to the Govigama caste. On the other-hand they accept with open arms all offerings made by the non Govigama community, ignoring their supposed low rank in society. In addition to food and clothing, even temples built and vehicles provided by the 'lower castes' are received with glee. Take the example of a boy from the Govigama caste, working in the household of a rich master from a lower caste. The irony is, the monks will accept this boy for monastic ordination but turn down the son of the householder sighting caste incompatibility.

Caste difference has been a major obstacle for the advancement of the Sinhala community. It is no secret that the attitude of Buddhist monks has influenced the continuation of caste based practices within the society. This is highlighted by the Siam sect's custom of ordaining persons belonging only to a single caste. The key accountability for easing caste based discrimination in the country should rest on the shoulders of the chief monks of the Siam sect.

All open-minded people across the civilised world may be saddened by the caste segregation in our country imposed by a religious order. If the Siam sect continues this prejudiced tradition, the wider community will not

be able to associate with this sect with trust and respect. It should be emphasised that there is a significant percentage of monks within this sect who do not approve of the caste system.

It is my strong belief that this abhorrent tradition will be done away with in the future. This will pave the way for the Sinhala community to live in harmony. Both monastic and lay communities must rally together to achieve this objective.

5.
Meritorious acts and Expectations

Reader: You have stated that if an activity is done with the hope of gaining merit, it is a tainted thought process. You have even indicated that doing a good deed with the expectation of attaining nirvana is not consistent with the Buddhist thinking. I cannot understand this position. Could you please clarify your view?

Author: Yes, I will attempt to clarify my point of view through reasoning. Through wise and unbiased consideration, you may arrive at the truth.

People involve themselves in trading practices. They sell rice, other food items and clothing to the wider community without any race or caste bias. Why aren't these actions regarded as wholesome acts?

Reader: It is because these activities are done with the intention of gaining some personal profit.

Author: Correct, everyone accepts this without argument.

Similarly, if someone helps a needy person expecting a benefit such as recognition or praise would you acknowledge that the deed was done with pure intentions?

Reader: Not at all. The intentions were not pure as it is done in anticipation of some gain in this world. It is like a trading transaction.

Author: Good, let us assume someone helps a needy person expecting some benefit in the next world. What is your view about this?

Reader: I don't see anything wrong with it. Don't we all do virtuous deeds for the sake of happiness in the next world?

Author: Yet, this too was not done with wholesome intentions. Whether the benefit relates to this world or the next, self-interest was the driving force. There is a small difference between the two types of expectations. By expecting gains in the next world, we are just delaying the reward for a certain period. A rich person deposits money in a bank anticipating a big return with interest in a couple of years. The money is not deposited in the bank because of his fondness to the bank. Self-interest is

still the motive. This is no different to performing some action now expecting comforts in the next life.

It is a common view that ‘expecting happiness in the next life’ is a noble and wholesome thought. But the idea of comforts in the next life translates to having delicious food, houses, land, vehicles and clothing, during that existence. Clearly the benefits anticipated are similar irrespective of when they are received. Therefore, the line of reasoning that an intention is pure simply because a gain is to be received in a future life and not in the current existence does not hold water.

Reader: Then, should we stop believing in fruits of action (Karma Phala)?

Author: The concept of 'Karma Phala' signifies that each action results in an appropriate fruit or outcome. To understand 'Karma Phala' we need to grasp the merits of every action. We need to realise whether an action is virtuous or immoral, and whether it is essential or unnecessary. Understanding this reality requires wisdom. Whether the result is experienced in this world or the next is unimportant. Believing in fruits of action does not involve forming an attachment to the fruit or outcome. Desiring an outcome is ‘craving’ (tanha). There is a significant distinction between craving and wisdom. To perform a deed and then greedily expect a favourable result is like completing a trading transaction. Even though helping a needy person is a good deed, expecting a gain from it is not a wholesome thought.

Let us explore this further. Suppose you offer five cents to a beggar expecting a good life in the next world. You are giving away the five cents because you feel it is more profitable to give it away rather than keep it. This not an action done with any compassion towards the beggar. The beggar is a mere participant in your scheme to get to heaven. But if you offer money to the beggar with genuine concern to his plight, despite experiencing some personal hardship and without any consideration for the benefit, then that is truly a noble action.

The same values can be applied to observing of precepts. If someone refrains from killing an animal simply because of his fear of breaking a precept and committing a sin, rather than out of sincere love and

compassion for the creature, then that is not a wholesome thought. On one occasion a friend pointed to a sick dog with a skin disease and stated with great disgust, "I would kill that dog, if not for the sin I would incur". My friend may have followed the words of the precept but not its spirit. A virtuous person will not kill or harm animals out of compassion towards them, even if there is an edict stating that 'you can acquire merit by killing animals'. We should show loving kindness not for gaining merit for ourselves but for the wellbeing of others. This wise thought process can be applied to all virtuous actions we perform.

Reader: Then, is it wrong to avoid sinful acts because of the fear of reprisal?

Author: No, no, this is a matter that requires careful reflection. Unfortunately, many misinterpret my point of view.

It is always better to refrain from a sinful act even due to fear of reprisal, rather than committing the evil act. Similarly, it is preferable to help a person in need expecting praise and gain, rather than not assisting him at all. I wished to impress the need to cultivate pure and wholesome intentions for the deeds we perform. We cannot realise the truth by continuing to act with unwholesome intentions.

Reader: But wouldn't this be an outlook an ordinary person would find challenging to grasp and act upon?

Author: Yes, I agree. These insights are for special people and not designed for the 'ordinary'. The Buddha stated that the teaching is for the wise and not intended for the unwise. The truth cannot be revised and made easy so that an unwise person may understand it, if we attempt this, the truth may be distorted and provide a wrong teaching. Individuals need to elevate their understanding to a 'special' level so that the truth may be realised.

Reader: Then, isn't performing an act expecting merit a wholesome intention?

Author: If someone performs an act with the intention of gaining merit, his mind is in an impure state. Even if an extremely virtuous act is done the underlying motivation for it is self-interest.

Focus should not be on the effect (Vipāka) of the deed, but on the merit and value of the deed.

We need to consider if the act benefits others and whether we are duty bound to perform this act. If the action is worthy and righteous, we need to do it without any concern to whether it will take us to heaven, hell or nirvana.

On one occasion I was invited by the Pallepattu village council to conduct a week-long teaching program at the town of Eheliyagoda. During my stay I was involved in a fund-raising drive to help the destitute. The participants in this campaign sacrificed one meal and contributed the cost of that meal to 'help the destitute' fund. I too joined in this fasting activity. My daily meals for the week had been assigned to nominated donors. I advised the designated donor that I will not be accepting a meal on the day of the fast and that he may donate the costs to the fund.

This donor was initially extremely distressed as he had lost an opportunity to acquire much merit by offering me a meal. He pleaded with me to accept the meal. I very kindly asked this person whether he could not forego the great merit he was about to gain for the sake of the poor. "In that case venerable sir, I will give up this merit and donate the cost towards the destitute fund" said the virtuous man. This person gave away something that was very dear to him. What he did was an extremely noble act. He had the strength and purity of mind to let go of a merit he considered greater than wealth. I did not attempt to explain to him that the act he accomplished was nobler and superior to the act he originally intended. I saw no reason to pollute his thought process by reintroducing a longing for greater merit.

This incident was a great learning experience for me. It provided me more insight than reading a hundred books. This man 'gave up' an attempt to earn great merit and he did his duty towards the poor people with compassion. By this he moved a step closer towards Nirvana and the truth.

One day 'Māra' the tempter, approached ascetic Gauthama (the Buddha to be), who was meditating on the banks of the Neranjana river. Māra, in order to dissuade the sage from his resolve suggested 'Live, Sir! Life is the better way. You can gain an entire world of merit if you live.'

The ascetic Gauthama replied, 'Anumaththenapi puññena, Aththo mayihamna vijjathi'. By these words he indicated that the acquisition of merit is not of significance to him. The focus of the great sage was not to gain merit but to act in the best interests of all beings.

Reader: However, it is difficult to accept your objection for desiring the state of Nirvana.

Author: Yes, it is a difficult concept to understand.

It is quite easy to recognise that actions done with the intent of self-benefit in this world are not meritorious in nature. If we extend this notion, we can appreciate that even acts expecting personal gain in the next world cannot be deemed meritorious. But we struggle to grasp that wanting the state of Nirvana is also based on self-interest.

Reader: What is Nirvana?

Author: Nirvana is the ultimate liberation. But let us not expand on it just yet. I wish to emphasise that even though Nirvana is a noble teaching, doing a virtuous act such as giving a donation and then expecting Nirvana is not a wholesome thought process.

Reader: Nirvana is the final-state for a Buddhist. How can wishing to reach this state be deemed unwholesome?

Author: Nirvana is the final-state for all beings, not only for Buddhists. If a person follows the teaching without desiring Nirvana but with the intention of doing good to the world, he would reach Nirvana at the end of his journey.

Reader: Well, nothing can be fulfilled in this world without having expectations. If a person leaves home without a clear destination, he himself would not know where he would end up. Similarly, irrespective of whatever the situation may be with other expectations, a person has no prospect of reaching Nirvana unless he wishes for it.

Author: While similes can be used to explain the truth, this simile is inept in clarifying the true position relating to Nirvana. The simile suggests that one must explicitly wish to attain Nirvana. In the world we live in there are many roads leading to one location. Further, there are various roads leading us in different directions. However, there is but one path that takes

us to Nirvana. If we take that path, Nirvana will be our destination. The path will not take us to any other place.

There other similes that support my view. A hungry man obtains sufficient food and consumes it. Would he then need to make a wish, 'Oh, let my hunger go away'? Certainly not. A farmer prepares a paddy field, sows the rice and tends to the crop with great care. Because of the work he has done he will get a good harvest. Does he have to make a wish, 'Oh let me receive a good harvest'? If you can sufficiently elevate your mind to realise the truth, you will attain Nirvana. This result cannot be avoided. There is no need to wish for it.

It is important to differentiate supramundane teachings from mundane or worldly teachings. The Buddha emphasised that there is a significant difference between the way to Nirvana and the way to obtaining profits and gains in the material world. I accept that a specific wish or expectation needs to be present in achieving a worldly objective. However, to reach a supramundane goal such as Nirvana, any expectation should be completely absent. The thought, 'I wish to attain Nirvana,' is a subtle reflection of self-interest. Nirvana cannot be reached until all self-interest is eliminated.

Reader: Historical accounts of some of Buddha's disciples have been recorded through many of their previous lifetimes. It is frequently stated that a certain disciple made a specific wish during the period of a certain previous Buddha and that aspiration was finally realised during the time of Gauthama Buddha. How would you clarify these accounts?

Author: The truth cannot be judged by a historical narrative or a story. Instead the truth needs to be applied to fathom the validity of a story. It is the truth that is of primary importance. A historical account is like a reported news item and is of secondary significance. Using a news item to validate a teaching (Dharma) is a dangerous approach.

Reader: There is a belief among certain quarters that aspiring is a powerful norm in Buddhist teaching and that Nirvana cannot be achieved without aspiration. What is your view on this?

Author: I humbly state that those who hold that view do not understand the Dhamma. The noble eight-fold path is the way to Nirvana based on Buddhist teaching. It is the complete path. If a person without

‘aspiration’ cannot reach Nirvana, ‘aspiration’ should have been included as a primary component of the noble eight-fold path. There is no ‘right aspiration’ contained in the Buddha’s teaching.

Stating that a person without an aspiration cannot attain Nirvana is a wrong view.

Reader: Some say that the real fruits of a wholesome action cannot be experienced if there is no aspiration.

Author: If this is correct, then the same principle should apply for unwholesome actions as well. We could perform an unwholesome act and simply get off the hook as we did not have any wish for an unpleasant consequence. The concept of ‘fruits of action’ (Karma Phala) is equally applicable for wholesome and as well as unwholesome deeds.

If a person follows the noble eight-fold path and has a mind sufficiently elevated to realise the truth, he will attain Nirvana. A special wish or aspiration is not required. We may have wished for Nirvana through our journey through samsara (the cycle of existence). But did we achieve that goal? It is necessary to follow the prescribed path rather than having a wish. A wish is only a variation of a prayer form.

Let me provide you with a simile to stimulate your thinking.

You and I are great friends and we are in the presence of the Buddha. You are on the verge of reaching Nirvana.

You say to the Buddha, "If only I can reach Nirvana but not my friend, it is of no value to me."

The Buddha replies, "If you so wish, your Nirvana can be passed on to your friend. But if you do that you will never be able to reach Nirvana again."

(Note: This is an imaginary scenario that cannot happen)

You have the following thought, "If I give away my Nirvana to my friend now, I will never be able to get there again. So, I will take it now. My friend can get there later." With that thought you will move thousands of miles away from the Nirvana you were about to reach.

But instead you think, "Even if I never reach Nirvana, even if I must suffer internally in hell, let me give this Nirvana to my friend." Then not

only will you reach Nirvana but you will also be the supreme Buddha.

If you wish for Nirvana, you will not reach it. If you let go of that wish for the sake of others you will reach it. This is the paradox on attaining Nirvana.

Reader: If there is no expectation, do the acts we perform serve any purpose?

Author: An 'expectation' arises due to desire. This process involves craving and unwholesome thoughts. Our mental conditioning is such that we are not inclined to act unless there is a perceived gain. There is a very powerful but subtle element of self-interest in play here.

Reader: Some say that we should aspire to become one of the three types of 'awakened beings' (Bodhi) which are sammāsambuddha, paccekabuddha and arhath. There are others who express the view that we should aspire to be a sammāsambuddha; if we fail to reach the first goal we may become a paccekabuddha; if we fail to reach the second goal we may become an arhath. What is your view on this?

Author: This is not a subject that warrants much discussion. It is a demeaning thought process since an effort and determination to achieve a goal is clearly absent. If we intend to work with determination and resolve, the concept of 'failing' should not be a consideration. This approach identifies a series of aspirations. We are moving from a higher aspiration to a lower aspiration based on failure. Nirvana cannot be reached with this type of weak and backward mindset that lacks self-belief. Nirvana is realised by a bright mind rich with effort, determination and wisdom.

A person with no self-will or self-courage who thinks, 'if I fail with this, at least I may get that' will not succeed even in daily tasks, let alone having the capacity to reach Nirvana.

Reader: I am disappointed with your response. Let us consider the following similes.

There is a tree with three branches. A man jumps up with the intention of grabbing the top most branch. If he misses he may be able to grab the next branch. If he misses that too he may hold the lowest branch.

A man wants to swim across a river. There are three river docks on the other side. He aims to swim to the furthest dock up the river. If he fails he has a chance to get to the second dock. If that too fails he can still may make it to the closest dock.

Likewise, if a person tries to reach the 'Samma Sambuddha' state and fails, he may able to reach ‘Paccekabuddha ' state. If he fails in that attempt too he may at least reach the ‘Arhath’ state.

What would you say on this point of view?

Author: I am reluctant to use examples and similes when discussing a sublime teaching. However, I cite the following simile to underline that it is not fruitful to aspire as indicated in your examples.

A student sits for an examination to qualify as a Barrister, but fails the test. Because of his failure, would he routinely qualify to practice as a Solicitor or a Notary? Certainly not! The assumption that if you aspire to become a 'Samma Sambuddha' and fail, then you are eligible to be a ‘Paccekabuddha’ or an ‘Arhath’ is false. This thought process is self-deceiving. By ignorantly following these misguided concepts and processes the human values have declined through the generations.

Reader: How did the custom of embracing wishes and aspirations originate then?

Author: This is no great mystery. Wishes arise naturally due to desire. A person with an untrained mind may experience a subconscious fear that he will not receive a gain for a deed he has performed. Due to a combination of ignorance, fear and desire he may resort to wishing, ‘Let me have this!’

It is easy to tempt people to make aspirations. When studying the written texts, it is evident that monks too have contributed in developing this notion. There are authors as well as preachers who have often contradicted themselves. They, on the one hand denounce the seeking of worldly comforts and, on the other hand seek aspirations that deliver similar gains. When a person performs a meritorious act, monks encourage him to make a wish along the lines of, ‘Through this merit let me gain worldly and heavenly comforts culminating in the attainment of Nirvana.’ People continue to do meritorious acts in anticipation of all these great gains that

they are wishing for. If there is no wish, there is little reason for them to perform something wholesome.

The focus on making wishes has contributed towards the decline of our values. We are moving away from living our daily lives in accordance to the Dhamma, with the notion that all this can be postponed until the arrival of the 'Maithri Buddha'.

Reader: Are there any wishes that are worthwhile?

Author: It appears that we need to make at least some type of wish. I do not endorse any wish associated with self-interest.

We may focus on noble wishes that are for the wellbeing and happiness of all sentient beings such as:

"In all my future existences let me have the opportunity to help those who are in need."

"May I do only good and nothing bad to all beings"

Reader: Your perspectives are radically different to commonly accepted points of view. They deviate from opinions expressed in books as well. For these reasons it has not been easy to understand them.

Author: Yes, comprehending these views and conforming to them is not easy. Frequently what is stated in books as 'wishes' and 'aspirations' are not interpreted accurately. Merely knowing a language is not sufficient to construe a deeper teaching. Words such as 'wish' are commonly used when labelling a thought process associated with a Bodhisattva. It is inappropriate to link these 'wishes' with 'let me have that!' type of yearning stemming from self-desire. Bodhisattva did not have a desire for Nirvana. He was a person attempting release from craving and concerned about the wellbeing of others. There was no self-desire attached to aspirations of a Bodhisattva. We can help ourselves by helping others.

Mulapariyaya Sutta states that an uninstructed run-of-the-mill person (Pruthagjana) conceives Nirvana as 'mine' and delights in Nirvana. However, awakened persons such as Arhaths and Buddhas do not delight in it. Free thinking is necessary for realisation of the Dhamma. The right understanding of the Dhamma is superior to the construction of a hundred

thousand temples or making a food offering to a hundred thousand monks including the Buddha.

6.
Conflicting Views

Buddhists may be regarded as the foremost among free thinkers in this world. Of the founders of religious traditions, the Buddha was the first to emphasise the value of ‘free thinking’. His teaching was a bold and forthright act of assertion that underlined the capacity to realise the truth.

The Kālāma Sutta from the ‘the book of threes’ (Tika Nipātha) in the Anguttara Nikaya, provided the world with the ‘charter of free inquiry.’ It states:[8]

"Come Kalamas, do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.' Kalamas, when you yourselves know, 'These things are unskilful; these things are blameworthy; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' abandon them."

This doctrine is a revolutionary landmark in the history of spiritual teaching. The Buddha recognised the need to challenge established bastions such as tradition, religious scriptures and viewpoints of teachers, to realise the truth. For this proclamation, he may have faced capital punishment in any country other than India. We know of spiritual leaders from other countries who were persecuted for their views. There were many who attempted to harm the Buddha for expressing such forthright views. The world is indeed fortunate that all these efforts ended in failure.

Saint Francis of Assisi was a noble hermit. He is known as the second Christ. His compassion was such that when he addressed the birds saying, "Little brothers come down", those birds left their perches, and hopped down onto the hermit's head and shoulders. When he spoke to the wild animals in the forest, they came over to him without any fear. This great man lived a simple life dedicated to serving mankind.

On one occasion, Saint Francis requested two of his disciples to plant cabbages. He instructed them to make sure that the roots were on top and leaves below. One disciple obeyed the teacher's instructions. But the other challenged the directions stating that roots should be below and leaves above. Saint Francis admonished the student saying, "Are you attempting to be better than your teacher?" This story illustrates that even the noble and compassionate Saint Francis may not have valued the need for 'free inquiry'.

The general approach to Buddhist teaching in our country today mirrors this episode. The students of Dhamma rarely challenge tradition, religious scriptures or a viewpoint of the teacher. The teachers too, tend to consider the students as subordinates. Diverse views and opinions are not usually tolerated. This prevents the students from exploring the teaching with a critical and inquiring mind.

It is natural to have conflicting views on any subject. Religion is no exception. If someone is unduly disturbed when faced with differing opinions, it reflects the person's inadequate disposition. The Pope, as well as any other Christian, has a right to express their views about Christianity. Neither party has met or spoken to Christ. Both parties have formed their views by reading the Bible. Similarly, a chief Buddhist monk has no right to summarily overrule an opinion of an ordinary Buddhist who has studied the scriptures. Both have studied the same 'Tripitaka' and have not had the opportunity to discuss the matter with the Buddha. Just prior to his departure from this world, the Buddha stated that as far the Dhamma was concerned, as the teacher, he had held back nothing. There was nothing left to be ascertained from him.

The notion that 'Anything written in the scriptures should be accepted' is a false view. The Buddha stated, 'mā pimaka·sampadānena' which translates to 'Do not go upon what is in a scripture'. The Bible is the scripture in relation to Christianity. The Islam scripture is the Quran. Similarly, the Buddhist scripture is the Tripitika. It is no secret that many Buddhist texts written long after the Buddha's 'parinibbana' are not aligned with the original teaching. When we attempt to ascertain the truth of these teachings, conflicting views may arise. Even in relation to religious texts, free inquiry is necessary in determining and realising the truth. Conflicting

views have been discussed even in the historical Buddhist commentaries. This confirms that there has been differing opinions on some aspects of Buddhist teaching even during ancient times.

Performing rites and rituals (Sīlabbata-parāmāsa) is established as a Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka today. This is an outcome of an un-Buddhist concept being adopted over many generations without necessary inquiry or censure. Blindly bowing down to any tradition that comes down the generations is a fundamental weakness of an untrained mind. While there are worthy customs that ought to be followed, it is unwise to adopt every age-old ritual. Many claim age-old traditions need to be honoured. But neither truth nor comprehension is dependent upon tradition. Any practices we introduce today may be regarded as tradition in another hundred years. But should the citizens of the future accept these practices unconditionally as they are 'age-old traditions'?

There was a chief monk who was in the habit of holding his bowl against the sun, prior to going out on his alms round each day. Soon all his disciples adopted the same practice and this tradition continued for seven generations. The reason the chief monk held his bowl against the sun was to determine the position of a tiny hole in this bowl. He then placed a finger covering the hole so that there would be no leakage. This is an example of blindly following the teacher and a tradition without attempting to understand the reason. Unfortunately, we follow many similar customs today. We are also inclined to respect traditions that have passed down from the times of our ancient kings. However, we need to exercise caution when selecting kings as our role models for spiritual learning.

Public opinion is of essence when dealing in matters such as politics, law making, employment and taxes. Yet spiritual teachings should not be based on public opinions or society views. The majority cannot be relied upon to be virtuous and high in spiritual wisdom. The Buddha realised at the very outset that the uninstructed mainstream may not have the capacity to grasp a deep teaching. We live in a world where anger, jealousy, deceit, arrogance, and ignorance are common place. Expecting Nirvana after performing a meritorious deed is an unwholesome thought driven by self interest. This explanation may be highly unsettling to the majority. But a person with wisdom may appreciate this truth. We should not withhold a

noble teaching simply because the majority may not understand it, may not accept it, or may oppose it.

Many are fearful of situations that generate a public outcry. There is not much difference between fearing public opinion and being afraid of an individual. It would be a crucial weakness if you do not express your honest and forthright views fearing public opposition. Persons seeking personal gain, glory, praise, and power are reluctant to go against public sentiment by expressing their honest opinions.

The society resists the introduction of an unfamiliar or unpopular concept. History frequently records volatile community uprisings that have resulted due to a detested act or notion. There were many who opposed the views of the Buddha during his lifetime. There were several failed attempts to take his life. On one occasion, a huge boulder was pushed down a hill slope onto the path where the Buddha was walking. In another elaborate plot, a group of archers were hired to shoot down the Buddha. In a third incident, an intoxicated elephant was let loose in the street to charge at the Buddha, while was on his alms round with a community of monks. There were also attempts to disgrace the impeccable character of the Buddha. Other spiritual teachers, envious of the Buddha's wide following, conspired to destroy his reputation. They directed a female ascetic by the name of Cinca to make a false accusation against him. Cinca arrived dressed up as a pregnant woman and publicly accused the Buddha of fathering her child. On another occasion his adversaries, killed a female wandering ascetic known as Sundari and buried her body close to the monastery where the Buddha was residing. On the pretext of searching for her they dug her body out and proclaimed to the world that 'Ascetic Gautama had secretly murdered Sundari and then concealed her body.' This incident created much turmoil in the community. Due to the harsh reaction of the people, the Buddha and his disciples were confined to the monastery for a week.

Other renowned spiritual leaders also faced much hostility for expressing their truthful views. The Jewish clergy who opposed the teachings of Jesus Christ, captured him and had him crucified. Prophet Mohammed's step father was enraged by his views and attempted to stab him but failed. The Greek philosopher Socrates spoke against the religious beliefs of his people. He was arrested and convicted by the state. As his

punishment, he was forced to drink poison. The exclusion of untouchables (Panchamas) from society was a social evil that had beset India for many generations. Mahatma Gandhi worked with much energy and zeal to remove 'untouchability' from the Indian social system. There were several attempts to harm him.[9] The history of mankind records many such unfortunate incidents.

A silent rock is an image of tranquillity. A dead body appears to be at peace. But does that peace or tranquillity offer any benefit? When the citizens are asleep at night, there is calmness in the city. This state may be appealing to burglars. When people are awake and involved in activities differences and disturbances may arise. This situation is part and parcel of active engagement in tasks. If a person is fearful of disturbances, then he should remain sleeping without getting up until his death.

A lazy man does not like waking up. He may be annoyed with someone who wakes him. The drowsiness or lethargy of mind provides even a bigger challenge. The lethargic thinker will resist any attempts to awaken his mind. But the person will benefit if he is aroused from his slumber and begins to reason independently. Some oppose this 'mind awakening' on the basis that people will be misled and disturbed by listening to conflicting views. Yet when a person in darkness sees light, he is encouraged into positive action.

The Sri Lankan society remains in a docile state in relation to exploring and probing the truth. Almost everyone, from the knowledgeable scholar down to the man in the street, accepts tradition and whatever is written in books with much reverence. Little effort is made to validate and establish the truth. Unless a personal loss is envisaged, seeking the truth is of insignificance. Anything written in Pali is acknowledged as Buddha's teaching without debate. No one inquires if our customs and views are in line with the Dhamma. No one bothers to reflect why our ethical and moral values have declined despite our 'noble' traditions.

There has been no attempt at social reform through the introduction of better society practices replacing outdated customs. Progressive transformation leads to society upliftment while regressive transformation signals society decline. The bullock cart made today has the same design it

had several centuries ago. Unfortunately, the student thinking innovatively and differently from the teacher is considered taboo.

Based on the recent feedback received at discourses and through letters, there appears to be an awakening or an 'uproar' among the Buddhist community in the country. This is indeed good news. Favourable social reform cannot take place without an uproar and an upheaval.

It is a pity that our message has been wrongly interpreted in certain quarters. This has come about because of the lack of direct communication with us and the spread of wrongly understood concepts and reports. Our aim is to ensure that the entire community realises the truthful teaching. If we have explained any concept incorrectly, we are more than happy to accept our error through rational discussion and debate. In the inquiry to determine the truth, simply questioning 'why was such a statement made in that particular book?' or 'why did that renowned teacher introduce this practice?' is a weak and futile approach. What is necessary is an informative evaluation of the merits of the statement or practice, and then arrive at a wise conclusion. Being affronted by an opinion that does not agree with your own is a weakness that needs to be addressed by the right understanding of the Dhamma.

We do not claim that all our views should be accepted or that there are no shortcomings in our ideas. Further, an opinion that appears to be right now may need to be revisited and revised at a later point. Simply focusing on proving someone wrong is not the way to establish the truth. The truth is universal and not something owned privately by an individual. The truth may be quite contrary to what we had learnt and accepted. What we need is not a society of 'yes' men or women, but a community of people who are inclined to explore the truth with an enquiring mind.

Questions and Answers

The questions answered in this section were received by post, inquired at discourses or raised privately. Any questions which were not appropriate to be answered in a public forum has been excluded. Some questions were edited to ensure clarity and conciseness. The name of the questioner has been excluded.

Question: In Sathydoya section 4 (Caste based segregation among monks), it is mentioned that, 'Jathi Kula-puthra refers to a son born into a high caste as acknowledged by social convention'. This implies that the world accepts certain castes as 'high'. Do you accept this social convention? Can you name a high caste based on this convention?

Answer: It is no secret that social convention regards certain castes as 'high'. No one can deny this reality. However, we do not uphold this position. Brahmana is considered as a high caste. But this is not in accordance with the Dhamma. The Buddha taught us that 'a person is a Brahmana or an outcaste, not by birth but by action'. Social convention should not be confused with the values we uphold.

Question: In some areas of Sri Lanka, Buddhists ensure that even the Buddha Statues follow the rain retreat (Vas) practice. What is your view on this?

Answer: When the rationale for a rain retreat is clearly understood, the answer would be evident.

During the days of the Buddha, monks did not live in one place as is common today. For eight months of the year, they travelled from village to village teaching the community. In India, the seasons were different to that of Sri Lanka. As there were heavy rains for about four months, it was inconvenient for the monks to move around during that period. The Buddha understood that these four months were the most suitable time for the monks to take a break from their continuous travel.

There was also a common consensus among the Indian people that journeying during the rainy season was an inappropriate activity, particularly for the clergy. Seeds germinate during rainy season. There was discontent in the community regarding travelling monks treading on grain seedlings, young plants and grass.

The monks during the Buddha's time dressed themselves in robes made from hand woven cloth. There was no machine woven cloth then and robes were hard to come by. Sometimes monks who were drenched in the rain had to remain in their wet clothing as they did not process spare robes. This had an adverse impact on their health.

After considering many such reasons, the Buddha instructed the monks to refrain from travelling and to remain at a specific location during the rainy season. Customarily, the Buddha too resided in one place during this period. The forest dwelling monks returned to the villages to spend the rainy season.

This is the context within which the practice of rain retreats was introduced during the time of the Buddha. Tending to a Buddha statue and assuming it needs to abide by the rain retreat practice, is an absurd and laughable notion.

Within the current Sri Lankan environment, it is debatable if even the monks need to follow the rain retreat practice, leave alone including Buddha statues into the process. Most monks in Sri Lanka reside at a single temple throughout the year. They rarely move out of the premises even for a week. The title deed of a temple may be in the name of the incumbent monk. The ownership of the temple may have been handed down through many generations of monks. A monk may have been instrumental in building the temple. Monks appear to have a claim for everything within the temple premises. It would be challenging to disinherit a monk even through a legal process. Under such circumstances lay devotees call over at the temple, pay respects to a monk and pronounce "Venerable Sir, we invite you to spend the four months of the rain retreat in this temple." Isn't this a big joke?

In Sri Lanka there no marked difference in climate across the seasons. The rain retreat period is characterised by warm weather with intermittent down pours. The rain fall during this period is no greater than the rain falls during the rest of the year. Based on local weather patterns, the rain retreat practice is not an essential concept to Sri Lanka. It is a custom which has been persisted without proper understanding.

Question: Many Buddhists display the picture of Arhath Seevali in their homes and business premises and light a lamp next to it. What is the significance of this custom?

Answer: The motivation here is not to venerate a noble saint but to obtain some gain. Arhath Seevali was foremost among Buddha's disciples who gained requisites. There is a misguided belief that by keeping his

image at home and at the business premises, one can enjoy great gains and benefits.

People are not even inclined to display an image of the highly revered chief disciple Arhath Sariputta as he is not thought of as someone who can generate business profit.

Question: Is adhering to auspicious times important in monastic activities such as ordaining someone to the monastic community?

Answer: They are certainly of no importance. By seeking auspicious times, we are disrespecting the Buddha's teaching.

'Nakkhanthan Pathimanettan attho Balan upachchaga

Aththo Atthassa Nakkhanthan Kin Karissathi Tharaka?'

'An unwise person holds up getting the work done on time, by seeking auspicious times. Getting into action is auspicious. What can the stars do?'

Monks who do not understand the Buddha's teaching and lack self-confidence and maturity, resort to auspicious times when commencing events such as higher ordination of priests, and the construction of statues and temples.

There is an instruction relating to auspicious times in the Vinaya.

"Ugganhatha Bhikkave Nakkhantan".

The astrological charts can be referred to only when determining the Poya (full moon) days.

Question: Is the effect of a wholesome or an unwholesome action greater if committed on a Poya day in comparison to any other day?

Answer: No. Dates relating 'Poya" are determined based in the phases of the moon. 'Poya' has no association with the mind. The Poya day is special not only for the Buddhists, it has been a sacred day for the Hindus as well.

'Suddhssuposatha Sada.'

'Every day would be Poya' for someone with a pure mind.'

Question: I listened to the same teaching explained in ten diverse ways by ten different monks. How can ignorant people understand ten

different interpretations of the same teaching?

Answer: The ignorant will not realise the Dhamma even if ten different monks taught it in the same way. When several monks teach the Dhamma in a consistent manner the ignorant may conclude, ‘this might be correct,’ but that does not imply that they really understood the Dhamma.

Whatever others might say, one needs to understand the teaching with one’s own wisdom. If a person cannot grasp a teaching due to lack of wisdom, we may empathise with that person. What else can we do? The Dhamma is for those who have cultivated wisdom. It is not meant for the unwise.

Question: Khatinancha, Parikkharan, Vasadanancha uttamam, Buddhapamukassa sangassa danan, dhammassa lekhanan, khettadanancha, Buddhassa patimakaranampicha, Karanan Vacchakutiya, Attapunnani Vychchari.

These are referred to as the 'eight great wholesome deeds'. What is your view on this matter?

Answer: I think this is another ploy to gain benefits.

The eight deeds mentioned in the question are:

1. Offering Kathina[10]
2. Offering (eight) requisites
3. Offering living quarters
4. Offering alms to the Buddha and the Sangha
5. Documenting the Dhamma in written form
6. Offering fields for cultivation
7. Construction of Buddha statues
8. Construction of toilets

While these actions can be considered as meritorious, none qualify as ‘great wholesome deeds'. All acts mentioned in the list provide some benefit to the monks. Further, monks have frequently exaggerated the merits gained by performing these acts. This teaching has prompted people to focus on external material factors. Many have moved away from developing internal

virtues such as courage, determination, integrity, tranquillity, loving kindness, and wisdom, due to the promotion of this notion.

Question: Should one represent oneself as a Buddhist to attain Nirvana? Are all those who take refuge in the triple gem Buddhists?

Answer: No. The Buddhist name tag will not help you to reach Nirvana, but the 'Buddhist conduct' will assist you to get there. A person will not become a Buddhist by merely taking refuge in the triple gem through a verbal utterance. Nor will the person be a Buddhist by simply wearing a robe. There are many with false views who are parading as Buddhists. There could be true Buddhists among those who wear the cross and others going under another religious label. Nirvana can be reached through sufficient advancement in mind and wisdom. No name of a religion is necessary to attain Nirvana.

A suggestion made by a friend:

Some say that offering food to a Buddha statue is more meritorious than offering food to a needy person who is hungry. Extending this line of thinking, why not offer food to the statues of noble Arhaths such as Sariputta and Moggallana, instead of giving food to dishonourable and non-virtuous monks?

(It is certain that monks will object to this proposal. I heard of a similar offering conducted in a village in the Sabaragamuwa province. The food offerings were placed on chairs bearing the names of the noble Arhaths. The monks in the area strongly opposed this event.)

7.
Proper Interpretation of 'Sangha' and 'Sanghika'

Reader: You state that the Sangha involving the 'eight noble persons' (Ashta Ariya Pudgala) consists of individuals from both monastic and lay communities. We cannot understand this suggestion. The consensus in our society is that the Bhikkhus represent the Sangha and that the 'legacy of the Buddha' (Sasana) cannot be safeguarded without the presence of robe-wearers. You are expressing a radical point of view. Could you clarify your position?

Author: Yes, I will attempt to explain this view point through a detailed discussion. It would be a new concept for those who assume that the monastic community alone signifies the Sangha.

People have moved away from the right teaching due to mistaken notions such as 'the Bhikkhus are the Sangha', 'the legacy of the Buddha cannot be maintained without the Bhikkhus' and 'the legacy of the Buddha will end when there are no robe-wearers'. The lay community expects the monks to safeguard the Buddhist doctrine. They are quick to blame the monks but they themselves make little effort to live in accordance to the teaching. Whatever their virtues may be, the monks too proclaim, 'We are the Sangha. Without us how could the legacy of the Buddha survive?'

The 'Triple Gem' represents Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. When elaborating on the gem identified as the Sangha, I intend to focus on 'Disciple Sangha' (Sravaka Sangha) and 'Eight noble persons Sangha' (Ashta Ariya Pudgala Sangha). The Sangha needs to be appraised not on their attire but on the qualities, they possess. Regardless of the garments they are dressed in, virtuous persons are included within the 'Disciple Sangha'.

The eight noble persons are those who have attained one of the eight stages of awakening, which are:

1. The path of Stream-winning (sotāpattimagga)
2. The fruition of Stream-winning (sotāpattiphala)

3. The path of Once-return (sakadāgāmimagga)
4. The fruition of Once-return (sakadāgāmiphala)
5. The path of Non-return (anāgāmimagga)
6. The fruition of Non-return (anāgāmiphala)
7. The path of Holiness (arahatta-magga)
8. The fruition of Holiness (arahatta-phala)

All these persons represent the ‘Eight noble persons Sangha’ (Ashtha Ariya Pudgala Sangha). Whether they belong to the monastic community or the lay community is insignificant. When we take refuge in the Sangha by saying ‘Sangha ṃ Sarana ṃ Gacchāmi’, we seek refuge in a community that has virtuous qualities and not in a group of people who wear a particular type of clothing.

The salutation to the Sangha which begins with 'Supatipanno Bhagavato Savaka Sangho' provides a clear account of the order of disciples (Srāvaka Sangha). It can be interpreted as:

"The order of the Blessed One’s disciples is well attained, upright, wise and dutiful. Who are they? The four pairs of persons, the eight types of individuals[11] that is the order of disciples of the Blessed One. They are worthy of offerings, hospitality, gifts and reverential salutations, and are an incomparable field of merit to the world."

Clearly there is no mention here about the attire that needs to be worn by the Sangha. The focus is on the qualities and attributes that the Sangha should possess.

The Ratana Sutta further details the qualities of the precious jewel known as the ‘Sangha":

*"The eight persons extolled by virtuous men constitute four pairs. They are the disciples of the Buddha and are worthy of offerings. Gifts given to them yield rich results. This too is a great virtue of the Sangha."

*"With a steadfast mind, and applying themselves well in the dispensation of the Buddha Gotama, free from defilements, they have attained that which should be attained (arahantship) encountering the Deathless. They enjoy the Peace of Nirvana freely obtained. This too is a great virtue of the Sangha."

*"As a post deepplanted in the earth stands unshaken by the winds from the four quarters, so, too, I declare is the righteous man who comprehends with wisdom the Noble Truths. This too is a great virtue of the Sangha."

*"Those who realised the Noble Truths well taught by him who is profound in wisdom (the Buddha), even though they may be exceedingly heedless, they will not take an eighth existence. This too is a great virtue of the Sangha."

*"With his gaining of insight, he abandons three states of mind, namely self-illusion, doubt, and indulgence in meaningless rites and rituals, should there be any. He is also fully freed from the four states of woe, and therefore, incapable of committing the six major wrongdoings. This too is a great virtue of the Sangha."

*"Any evil action he may still do by deed, word or thought, he is incapable of concealing it; since it has been proclaimed that such concealing is impossible for one who has seen the Path of Nirvana. This too is a great virtue of the Sangha."

Once again this contains no reference to a need for dressing in robes or shaving the head, in order belong to the Sangha. If either a monastic or a lay person reaches a stage of awakening by following the noble path he or she will represent the Ashta Ariya Pudgala Sangha. The story of Bāhiya, the wearer of bark clothing, confirms this position.

In the time of the Buddha there lived a man by the name of Bāhiya. During a sea voyage he was shipwrecked and washed ashore. He found himself on the beaches of Supparaka, a port town on the west coast of India (close to present-day Mumbai). Having lost all his clothes, he made himself a garment out of tree bark, and went about for alms in the nearby villages. The villagers, seeing his eccentric dress, thought he must be a holy man and offered him food. Because of his bark garment he was known as ‘Dāruchīriya’. Bāhiya lived a virtuous life of a hermit and gradually developed his inner qualities.

On hearing of the Buddha, he set off immediately to the city of Savatthi to meet the Buddha. In his eagerness he travelled the great distance from the western coast to Savatthi in a very short period. When he reached

the monastery where the Buddha was residing, the monks there informed him that the Buddha had gone to the town nearby to receive alms. Bāhiya Dāruchīriya immediately went in search of the Buddha, and found the blessed one walking down a street. Dāruchīriya approached the Buddha and with great faith requested a teaching. The Buddha indicated to him that there would be time for a teaching after completion of the meal. However, Dāruchīriya pleaded with the Buddha stating that “Throughout our cycle of births we have travelled in search of food. Your death or mine may occur at any moment. Therefore, please teach me the Dhamma without delay." In response to this appeal the Buddha gave him a very concise teaching while still standing in the street. Bāhiya directly realised the truth and became an Arhath.

Upon Bāhiya’s subsequent request to join the monastic order, the Buddha advised him to obtain a robe. A short while later, while searching for a robe Bāhiya was gored to death by a raging cow. On hearing the tragic news, the Buddha went over to the scene of the incident with other monks. The Buddha requested that the body of Bāhiya be cremated and a shrine be built depositing his relics. The Bikkhus followed his instructions.

In a later reference to Bāhiya the Buddha stated, “'Ethadagga ṃ Bhikkhave Mama Sāvakāna ṃ Bhikkūna ṃ Khippābhinnāna ṃ Yadida ṃ Bāhiya Dāru-Cheeriya”. This translates to, "Monks, Bāhiya Dāruchīriya is foremost among my disciples who promptly realised the truth."

Arhath Bāhiya Dāruchīriya never wore a robe. In fact, he was not even dressed in cotton clothing. Despite his bark dress, his humble status and his untimely death, the Buddha considered him as a member of the ‘Disciple Sangha’ and a very eminent one at that. In Buddhist literature Bāhiya is referred to as Monk Dāruchīriya (Dāruchīriya Thera).

In another instance, a chief minister by the name of Santhathi became an Arhath, while still adorned in all his regalia and passed into parinibbana soon after. He was not ordained as a monk. When a debate arose about the status of Santhathi, the Blessed One declared, "So Brahmano, So Samano, Sabikkhu." ("He is a brahmana, he is a samana[12], he is a monk.").

In conclusion it should be emphasised that ‘Eight noble persons Sangha’ (Ashta Ariya Pudgala Sangha) has no association to the dress worn

by an individual. A person with the requisite virtuous qualities will belong to the Sangha irrespective of the attire, while a person who does not possess these qualities will not be included in the Sangha even if dressed in robes.

Reader: Then, is there no difference between the lay and monastic communities?

Author: Certainly, there is a difference between the lay and monastic communities. The contrast should be understood clearly.

The noble order of disciples (Sravaka Sangha) is categorised into four groups. They are monks (Bikkhu), nuns (Bikkhuni), male lay-practitioners (Upasaka) and female lay-practitioners (Upasika). They are all persons of high morality. They represent both lay and monastic communities.

The word 'Sravaka' means student or disciple. The word 'Sangha' indicates a group or community. Therefore, 'Sravaka Sangha' can be interpreted as the student group of the Buddha. This student group includes both clergy and laity. The 'Sravaka Sangha' can be compared to a student group being taught by a head of a 'Pirivena'[13]. Both sets of pupils include monastics as well as lay persons. Further, if a person who has joined the monastic order does not have the requisite virtuous qualities, that person cannot be considered a member of the Sangha. The monastics known as the 'Bikkhu Sangha' is only a segment of the 'Sravaka Sangha'. Clearly the term 'Sangha' has a broader interpretation than the term 'Bikkhu'.

Reader: Are not all Bikkhus included in the Sangha?

Author: Uneducated rural folk are in the habit of addressing all men clad in trousers as 'gentlemen'. While there are gentlemen among those who wear trousers, there are many who do not deserve that title. Ignorant people commonly consider all those dressed in robes as belonging to the Sangha. Among those who wear robes there are individuals who are of immoral views and dishonourable conduct. The Sangha is acclaimed as an esteemed assembly. If the only criteria to be admitted to this community is a change of attire, then the assembly cannot be an esteemed one.

Reader: Even learned scholars have expressed the view that the 'legacy of the Buddha' (Sasana) will survive only if there are robe-wearers. You appear to voice a different opinion.

Author: I am aware that this view is expressed on almost every Buddhist Stage. The position that 'the legacy of the Buddha (Sasana) will survive only if there are robe-wearers' is a misguided one. A robe is made by stitching together pieces of white cloth and then dyeing it in the appropriate colour. If the Sasana is to be destroyed due to the lack of such a piece of clothing, then the Sasana must be of very low value. The Buddha Sasana represents the dispensation of truth. Is it justifiable to assume that the truth will disappear because a particular type of apparel is lost? Does the saffron colour signify the legacy of the Buddha? Or does the seeing of persons clad in saffron coloured robes moving about characterise the legacy of the Buddha? Every opinion needs to be investigated carefully.

The reasons for the current view needs to be explored. The monks of yesteryear looked at ways of increasing their influence and obtaining benefits from the society. So they put forward the notion, "We protect the legacy of the Buddha. Would the Buddhist doctrine survive without those of us wearing the robe?" The aging monks attempted to lay claims to the Buddha Sasana through their elderly and venerable appearance. Because of this ploy many in the community began to unconditionally accept the position that the monks are the protectors of the Buddha's legacy. The downside of this view is the assumption that lay persons have no part to play in safeguarding the Buddha Sasana and monastics alone need to fulfill that role. Very little thought is given to understand the significance of this 'Sasana' that needs protecting.

Suppose everyone in this world join the Buddhist monastic order, but with none realising the truth and all living unwholesome lives, would the Buddha Sasana be preserved?

Reader: Certainly not. They would not be protecting the legacy of the Buddha.

Author: Alternatively, if not a single robe is left in this world and even the saffron colour disappears, but the people live according to the teaching and realise the truth by cultivating ethical conduct (Seela), mental discipline (Samadhi), and wisdom (Pragna), would they be not protecting the Buddha Sasana?

Reader: Certainly, they are the ones who will be safeguarding the legacy of the Buddha.

Author: Then isn't it a folly to claim the 'legacy of the Buddha' (Buddha Sasana) will not survive when there are no robe-wearers? When there are no robes it is the familiar image of the Bhikkhu that will disappear and not the Buddha Sasana. The survival of the truth in this world is not dependent of a type of garment. On the same token, the noble gem identified as the Sangha will not vanish when there are no more robe wearers.

Reader: Could the lay community safeguard the legacy of the Buddha in the absence of monks?

Author: What is meant by protecting the Buddha's legacy? Protecting the legacy of the Buddha involves avoiding unwholesome activities, living righteously in accordance to the teaching and purifying our minds. Any person following these practices will be a protector of the Buddha Sasana.

The legacy of the Buddha is not an external object that requires defending or safeguarding. It signifies the internal qualities that need to be developed and cultivated by everyone. The temples and the other property owned by the monastic community is not the Buddha Sasana. The legacy of the Buddha cannot be secured by protecting these temples or by building more temples.

There is an inherent fear that a large community of people is required to protect the Buddha Sasana. This is a false notion. You as a single individual can safeguard the Buddha Sasana. That is your duty. 'Protecting the Buddha Sasana' is one of the most misunderstood phrases. Due to its improper interpretation both the lay and monastic communities have got themselves into a disappointing tangle.

The lay community has taken up the position, "We need to lead our lives as lay people. We cannot be expected to keep precepts and develop virtuous qualities. We cannot protect the Buddha's legacy. That is the responsibility of the monastic community." Thus, the lay community appears to have handed over the 'contract' for protecting the Buddha Sasana to the Bhikkhus. They provide the Bhikkhus with the necessary food, drink,

clothing, accommodation, etc, so that the 'contracted task' may be carried out effectively. When the Bhikkhus fall short in accomplishing their obligations, they are soundly blamed for not keeping their side of the 'contract agreement'. A lay person who accumulates money through dishonourable means makes an occasional appearance at the temple with the intention of gaining some merit, from that vast store of merit gathered by the Bhikkhus. If the Bhikkhus are non-virtuous then the merit store would be empty. When faced with this situation the lay persons accuse the monastic community for not acquiring sufficient merit which can be shared with them.

In the Hindu tradition Brahmanas are the custodians of scared knowledge. The lay followers expect to gain merit by supporting the Brahmanas who are entrusted with performing meritorious activities. If the Brahmanas display faulty conduct, the Hindu followers blame the Brahmanas as they are fearful of not obtaining sufficient merit. The current situation regarding an ordinary Buddhist is no different to this.

The lay community makes a big hue and cry about the destruction of the 'Buddha Sasana' when a monk conducts himself inappropriately. However, the lay person does not realise that he himself is destroying the Sasana by his unwholesome actions. Even if a Christian or a Muslim performs a wrongful deed, it is still a black mark against the legacy of the Buddha. The Buddha's teaching is universal and for the benefit of all beings. He did not target a specific group of people with his doctrine. Therefore, unwholesome actions of anyone would be a stain against his legacy.

When a Buddhist monk is found guilty of a crime Christians may rejoice openly and the incident may be publicised as contributing towards the decline of Buddhism. There may be a similar response from the Buddhists if a Christian priest is convicted for an offence. They do not realise that the unfortunate individual in each case fell into grief because his inability to live in accordance with the universal truth, the Dhamma. Buddhists focus on developing Buddhism while Christians emphasise on advancing Christianity. Both groups neglect the universal teaching as the key motivation is to advance the religion. Alas, this is the unenviable

situation with religions today. The attention is on counting the number on persons grouped under the label of each religion.

If the Buddha was alive today, it is certain that he would have treated any Christian priest who may have gone astray with great compassion and shown him the right path. Similarly, Jesus Christ too would have extended his empathy to any misguided Buddhist monk and steered him towards the path to salvation. It is unfortunate that the custodians of religious teachings today exhibit a narrow and limited outlook towards humanity.

It is wrong to assume that the legacy of the Buddha will fade because of the erroneous ways of the Bhikkhus. The universal truth dispensed by the Buddha cannot be destroyed even if all Bhikkhus in the world disrobe or conduct themselves dishonourably. One cannot be prevented from realising the truth by the faults of another. The erroneous ways of the Bhikkhus is not a valid reason stopping us from developing virtuous qualities and reaching Nirvana. Do the monks hold the keys to virtue, the teaching and the truth? Do they have all these ingredients locked up in some storeroom?

My message to those who blame monks for not protecting the legacy of the Buddha is this: "Why do you assign the safeguarding of the Buddha's legacy to weak monks? Do you need a cat's paw to fulfil this task? If you value and understand the legacy of the Buddha, why don't you take steps to protect it yourself? If you feel that you cannot fulfil this role effectively as a lay person, then why don't you join the order and accomplish the mission?

Reader: There is another matter that requires clarification. Your reasoning implies that there is no connection between realising the truth and wearing a robe. There is an established view that any person becoming an Arhath cannot survive as a lay person for more than seven days. If the person does not join the monastic order within the seven days, he or she will end the life in this world and pass into Parinibbana. What are your thoughts on this?

Author: I do not comprehend this concept. There cannot be any connection between the qualities of an Arhath and the type of dress worn by him. An Arhath is a being who has reached the highest sphere in wisdom and virtue. To him the type of dress would be low in significance. It is wrong to expect him to be dressed in a particular attire.

This view appears to be beneficial to the monastic community. The idea promoted is that a noble individual of the highest standing known as an Arhath, must be monastic. If not, he will die within seven days of his attainment. Is this a right teaching? The inference here is that a truly virtuous person cannot live within a lay community and must live a monastic life. From the perspective of a monk this may be restated as 'The noble Arhath is a person from our community. Other communities may have persons of lesser virtue'.

Perhaps this concept has been misinterpreted. A person who has become an Arhath may not wish to remain in lay life even for a moment let alone seven days. It is not the appearance or the dress of the person that is of significance. There are persons in lay clothing leading the lives worthy of monastics. On the other hand, there are robe wearers appearing as monks, who live their lives as lay persons.

Reader: Does the Vinaya apply to the Sangha representing both lay and monastic communities?

Author: No, the disciplinary code laid down by the Buddha (Vinaya) applies only to monks and nuns. It is not aimed at the order of disciples (Sravaka Sangha) and pertains to Bhikkhus and Bikkhunis.

Reader: Can 'Sanghika'[14] to be shared between both monastic and lay communities?

Author: The ability to use and share 'Sanghika' depends on the conditions under which the consecration is made. If the object is allotted specifically to the Bhikkhus, then Bhikkhunis or any other group has no entitlement over it. Similarly, if the object is allotted specifically to the Bhikkhunis, then Bhikkhus or any other group has no entitlement over it. In the event the consecration allows equal privileges to members from both monastic and lay communities, then the object or facility may be shared by both groups. Both ethically and legally if an object is consecrated to one group any other group has no entitlement or claim over it.

Reader: What is your view on Sanghika Vasthu[15]?

Author: It is my assessment that over ninety percent of objects currently identified as 'Sangika' are infact privately owned. Even when a property or a facility is donated to wider Sangha community for its common

use, before long it becomes the private inheritance of a specific sect, a chapter, a caste, or a monk teacher-student lineage. If any other groups attempt to use this property their claims are disputed and matters are usually settled through a legal process. How can we consider such properties or facilities as Sanghika Vasthu?

Today a great deal of wealth bearing the false title 'Sanghika Vasthu' is being wasted or misused due to the selfishness of individuals. These assets can clearly be put into more meaningful use. Perhaps the benefits and the value derived from them can be increased by a hundredfold. The facilities that come closer to the definition of 'Sanghika Vasthu' are those managed by public councils and not those managed by the Bhikkhus. Today the term 'Sanghika' implies the private inheritance of the monastic community.

The virtue of giving (Dāna) is enhanced if religious, race and caste differences as well as personal interests are absent from your intentions. A charitable act done with a narrow mind set will have a limiting effect. The Sanghika Dāna is considered a noble deed as there is no constraint in thought and intention when making the offering. The offerings of alms and other requisites is for the entire order of the Sangha.

Let us assume that a hospital is built for the Bhikkhus of one particular sect. Clearly this would be better than having a hospital that serves only a single chapter within the sect. But wouldn't it be better if the hospital was for the benefit of two sects?

Reader: Yes, that would have been a better outcome.

Author: Wouldn't it have been more beneficial if the hospital was constructed to serve the Bhikkhus of all three sects in the country?

Reader: Yes, that would be a nobler act.

Author: However, this hospital does not provide facilities for Bhikkhus from Thailand and Burma. What if we extended the facilities to Bhikkhus from all foreign countries as well? Wouldn't that be nobler?

Reader: Certainly, it would be.

Author: Now consider extending the hospital facilities to the clergy of all religions. All clergy will be treated with respect and kindness without

any religious bias at this hospital. Would this be a wonderful and virtuous outcome?

Reader: But does the concept of Sanghika apply to members of clergy from other religions?

Author: I do not intend to limit my focus to the 'Sangika' label or to any established constitution associated with it. Don't you think my suggestion is a highly noble one if considered virtuously, compassionately and impartially without any religious bias?

Reader: Without any reference to 'Sangika' and purely from the perspective of humanity your proposition is an extremely noble one.

Author: We would not consider this as a noble act if the scenario was tainted with religious bias, without compassion and neutrality. We see that treating clergy from all religions in a single hospital is nobler than restricting the facilities of the hospital to the clergy of one religion only.

If this hospital further extends its compassionate services to people from all countries, all races and all religions, which includes both clergy as well as lay communities, wouldn't that be nobler?

Reader: Yes indeed.

Author: Now, instead of limiting its services to humans wouldn't it be nobler to open the doors of the hospital to treat all animals with loving kindness and compassion?

Reader: Certainly, that would be a supremely virtuous act.

Author: The hospital that treats all beings without bias illustrates the concept of universality and impartiality rather than attempting to focus on the vastness of the facility. The facility may be a small one, but all are treated equally within its confines. This example may help you to understand the significance of the intention associated with giving (Dāna Chethanā).

Reader: What are your thoughts on Sanghika Dāna[16] offered today to ten, twenty, a hundred or a thousand monks?

Author: It is amusing to witness the current approach to Sanghika Dāna. A lay devotee invites ten monks to a meal. Food sufficient to feed ten persons is duly prepared at the home. The ten monks are called in and

offered the meal under the pretext that they are monks who arrived at the location from all four directions. The monks too declare that they descend from monastic tradition of Sariputta-Moggallana[17] and request that the food be offered in their noble memory. The monks who may lack in virtue, hide behind names of past noble saints such as Sariputta and Moggallana, while partaking in the meal. What type of Sanghika Dāna is this?

A certain lay devotee went over to several locations and invited about ten of his favourite monks for a meal. The chief monk presiding at the dāna had no hesitation in declaring that this act of offering bears great fruit as it is a Sanghika Dāna. The lay devotee was requested to recite the stanza applicable to Sanghika Dāna. It appears that the two parties were deceiving each other.

Sometimes when food is taken to the temple for the consumption of three monks observing rain retreat practices, two more monks arrive at the temple. Lay devotees interpret this situation as an opportunity to provide a Sanghika Dāna. The relevant stanza is uttered and food offered to all five monks. Even if the stanza is not uttered all five monks will partake the meal offering anyway. This practice conditions your own mind into believing that as the offering has been elevated to a Sanghika Dāna status, you are entitled to greater merit.

A person once described to me of a 'perfect' Sanghika Dāna that he had participated in. Every time a monk took a mouthful of food, additional rice and other food was put into his bowl to complement the food already consumed. This is to demonstrate that there was no shortage in the food being offered to monks. Expectation is that the merit gained by this offering would ensure the donors are never short of wealth in their future lives. Just as the food in the bowl keeps refilling, every time money is spent more money will come their way. Isn't it disappointing that such foolish notions are promoted in the name of Buddhism?

The current approach to offering alms to a hundred or a thousand monks is imprudent and laughable. Let us assume a great Sanghika Dāna is arranged for five hundred monks. To participate in the Dāna, monks travel from faraway places by train, car or buses and are exhausted when they reach the venue. They have a single meal and then rush back without much

joy. A large amount of money is spent for the event without appreciable benefit. If the monks were attending a conference perhaps more money would have been spent, but their travel would have been for a worthwhile purpose. The monks have sufficient food in the regions they live in. They have little reason to travel long distances just to partake in a single meal. There could be people living in poverty without sufficient food and clothing in the locality where the Sanghika Dāna is being organised. The Buddhists organising the event have no consideration for these destitute persons. These irrational customs have contributed towards the downfall of our society.

Records indicate that food offerings were made to large contingents of monks during the time of the Buddha. However, the practices then were vastly different. The monks were not collected from different regions and brought to a specific location. They were in the habit of journeying across the country dispensing their teaching to the community. When the Buddha accompanied by a large delegation of monks arrived at a certain region, the people of that area hosted the visiting monks to food and other requisites. The travelling monks could sustain themselves through this generous practice.

Attending to the welfare of the Bhikkhus present in a region, is the responsibility and duty of the lay community living in that area. There are monks living at faraway places who are not in need of food. Does the transportation of these monks a great distance to attend some alms offering make any sense? There is another downside of organising food offerings in a large scale. When a major non-vegetarian food offering is planned for monks, butchers in the area slaughter more animals in anticipation of the increased demand associated with the event.

In conclusion, I wish to make some clarifications. Please do not presume that offering alms to monks is not necessary or that such food offerings should be stopped. Offering requisites to the needy irrespective of whether they are virtuous or non-virtuous is a Bodhisattva[18] quality. Giving alms (Dāna) should not be to acquire merit to yourself but should be for the betterment of the receiver. Today many indulge in foolish pursuits in their quest for the acquisition of merit. How can you acquire merit by performing unessential, fruitless and meaningless acts in the name of

religion? A wholesome deed is an essential task carried out with wisdom. Many unwise practices done under the guise of wholesome acts have contributed to the decline of our society values and our personal internal advancement.

An explanation has been provided that the Sangha may include both monastic and lay communities. But this clarification is not intended for generating a sense of self-importance in lay persons with the thought, "We belong to the Sangha too." If such egoistic thoughts arise, the person will move away from being a member of the Buddha's order of disciples. Even for someone living a monastic life developing the virtuous qualities required to be a member of Sangha is a difficult proposition. For a lay person to acquire the necessary qualities to be included in the Sangha would be a significantly greater challenge. Notwithstanding the reasoning that virtuous lay persons may belong to the Sangha, the lay community should continue to treat the monastic community respectfully in accordance with the accepted social etiquette. These matters should be analysed and understood with wisdom.

Glossary

Aba-thel: Mustard oil

Achara Kula-puthra: A man of high moral standing and honourable conduct, irrespective of his birth status

Achinna-Kappa: Accepting an act which come through tradition and is performed earlier by a teacher or spiritual guide

Amarapura Sect: A Sri Lankan Buddhist monastic fraternity (nikāya) founded in 1800. It is named after the city of Amarapura in Burma, the capital of the Konbaung Dynasty of Burma at that time.

Amisa Puja: Offerings that are material in nature

Anguttara Nikaya: Numerical discourses, the fourth of the five collections in the Sutta Pitaka

Arhath: One who has gained insight into the true nature of existence and has achieved nirvana

Ashta Ariya Pudgala: Eight noble persons, those who have attained one of the eight stages of awakening.

Ashta Ariya Pudgala Sangha: Community comprising of those who have attained one of the eight stages of holiness.

Bodhi: An awakened being

Bodhi tree: The sacred fig (Ficus religiosa) under which the Buddha sat when he attained awakening (Bodhi) at Bodh Gaya. This term is widely applied to other sacred fig trees grown at places of Buddhist worship.

Bodhi Puja: The veneration of the Bodhitree by making offerings. This is a very recent form of ritual solution to most afflictions and problems and therefore sought after by some Buddhists.

Bodhisattva: Refers to the Buddha in his former life, someone on the path to liberation and aspiring to be a Buddha

Brahmana: Priests and teachers, custodians of sacred knowledge, the highest class in the Indian caste hierarchy

Bhikkhu: an ordained male monastic (monk) in Buddhism

Bikkhuni: an ordained female monastic (nun) in Buddhism

Buddha: Awakened one, Enlightened one

Buddha Pūjā: The practice of making offerings to the Buddha

Buddha Sasana: The dispensation, doctrine, and legacy of the Buddha

Dāhaspetiyamal: A type of flower named in Sinhala as the flower with a thousand petals

Dāna: The virtue of generosity, charity or giving of alms

Dāna Chethana: The intention associated with giving

Dasa Sanyojana: Ten fetters that bind beings to the cycle of rebirth

Dhamma: Truth, Teaching, Doctrine, Righteousness

Dharmadeepa: Island of Buddhist teaching

Dharma Puja: Offerings made to the Dharma (teaching)

Dvesha: Hate, aversion

Govigama: The largest and the most influential caste in Sri Lanka, have traditionally been responsible for cultivation

Jathi Kula-puthra: a man born into a high caste as acknowledged by social convention

Karma Phala: Fruits of action

Kathina: A Buddhist festival which comes at the end of the rain retreat (Vas).

Kathina offering: The offering of cloth for robes and other necessities to the monastic sangha at the end of the rain retreat.

Kshthriya: Warriors and rulers, royal caste, the second class in the Indian caste hierarchy

Kula-putra: A son of noble birth

Lokanatha: The guardian of people, a name given to the Buddha

Maithri Buddha: Regarded as a future Buddha of this world, a Bodhisattva who will appear on Earth in the future, achieve complete enlightenment, and teach the pure dharma

Mara: The personification of Death, the Evil One, the Tempter, he represents unskilful emotions or conditioned existence or temptation

Moha: Delusion

Nirvana: Ultimate reality, a transcendent state in which there is neither suffering, desire, nor sense of self, and the subject is released from the effects of karma and the cycle of death and rebirth.

Paccekabuddha: Someone who achieves enlightenment on his own, without the use of teachers or guides, but dies without proclaiming the truth to the world.

Pahan puja: Offering of lamps or light

Panchama: Outcaste, untouchable, a category so demeaned of status that it was not even referred to in the classical caste model

Parinibbana: Total release, complete liberation that occurs upon the death of an awakened being

Pinkam: Meritorious activities

Pirikara: Monastic requisites

Pirivena: A monastic college (similar to a seminary) for the education of Buddhist priests in Sri Lanka. These have also been the centers of secondary and higher education in ancient times for lay people.

Poya day: The full moon day based on the lunar calendar.

Pragna: Wisdom

Prathipaththi Puja: Practice-based offerings

Pretha: Hungry ghost

Pruthagjana: An uninstructed run-of-the-mill person

Puja: Ritualistic offerings

Raga: Lust, desire

Ramanya Sect: A Sri Lankan Buddhist monastic fraternity (nikāya) founded in 1864, when Ambagahawatte Saranankara, returned to Sri Lanka after being ordained at Ratnapunna Vihara in Burma

Sammāsambuddha: Perfectly Enlightened One, Supremely Awakened One

Shakya: A clan of late Vedic India (c. 1000-c. 500 BCE), Siddahartha Gauthama (who became known as the Buddha) was from this clan

Sangha: Monastic community; Community of noble (awakened) ones; The group of people who followed the Buddha's teaching to the goal of enlightenment.

Sanghika: Consecrations to the order of the Sangha for its common use.

Sanghika Dāna: Offering alms and other requisites to the order of the Sangha.

Sanghika Vasthu: Property, facilities or other objects consecrated to the order of the Sangha for its common use.

Samadhi: Mental discipline

Samana: A wandering ascetic

Samsara: Continuity of existence, Cycle of existence

Samanera: A novice monk

Seela: Ethical conduct

Sasana: Refer to 'Buddha Sasana'

Sathyodaya: Truth awakening

Shudra: Labourers and servants, the fourth (lowest) class in the Indian caste hierarchy

Sutta Pitaka: The second of the three divisions of the Tripitaka

Siam Sect: A Buddhist monastic order (nikāya) within Sri Lanka, founded by Upali Thera from the kingdom of Siam (Thailand) in 1753

Sīlabbata-parāmāsa: Attachment to rites and rituals

Sravaka Sangha: The order of the Buddha's disciples

Tanha: Craving

Thika Nipatha: The book of threes

Theseththa Gnana: Seventy-three supreme knowledges of the Buddha

Thripithaka: Three baskets, the traditional term for the Buddhist scriptures

Upasaka: A male lay-practitioner of the Buddha's teaching

Upasika: A female lay-practitioner of the Buddha's teaching

Vaishya: Traders, farmers and artisans, the third class in the Indian caste hierarchy

Vas: The three-month annual rain retreat observed by Buddhist monks. Taking place during the wet season, Vas lasts for three lunar months, usually from July to October.

Vipaka: Effect, ripening

Vihara: Buddhist monastery

Vinaya: The disciplinary code laid down by the Buddha for monks and nuns to observe

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[1] *Mustard oil offering*

[2] *Paying homage to seventy-three supreme knowledges of the Buddha*

[3] *Offering of Jasmine flowers*

[4] *Offering of Dahaspethiya flowers*

[5] *Around the time when the Sathyodaya book was published, the then President of Sri Lanka had ordered "Bodhi Pūjā" to be conducted throughout the island (1991-92). A special unit was formed to coordinate these Bodhi Pūjā, and Dasa Sil Mathas (white clad female renunciants but not formally ordained) were assembled by this unit to conduct these events at various temples. At these events, the participants would circumambulate a Bo tree, bathe it with scented water, repeat stanzas praising the Bo tree and ask for blessings. The President had also ordered police personnel stationed near the venues to join in procession with the Dasa Sil Mathas. Venerable Rahula was critical of this exercise for several reasons. According to him this type of "Bodhi Pūjā" sided with superstition, and was a*

recent addition to Buddhist traditions in Sri Lanka for he did not recall such events during his childhood. Further, Ven. Rahula considered this endeavour a political ploy, where female Buddhist devotees and police personnel were compelled to participate

[6] *The strands of the Kittul tree that look like long braided hair.*

[7] *The dispensation, doctrine, and the legacy of the Buddha.*

[8] *Etha tumhe kālāmā mā anussavena, mā param .parāya, mā iti ·kirāya, mā pi ṭ aka. sampadānena, mā takka. hetu, mā naya. hetu, mā ākāra ·parivitakkena, mā di ṭṭ hi ·nijjhāna kkhantiyā ,mā bhabba .rūpatāya, mā' samano no garū'ti. Yadā tumhe, kālāmā ,attanā .va jāneyyātha' :ime dhammā akusalā ,ime dhammā sāvajjā ,ime dhammā viññu ·garahitā ,ime dhammā samattā samādinnā ahitāya dukkhāya sanvattantī'ti, atha tumhe, kālāmā ,pajaheyyātha. ime dhammā kusalā atha tumhe upasampajja vihareyyatha.*

[9] *The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi took place 13 years after the publication of the original article.*

[10] *Offering made at the end of the rain retreat*

[11] *In the Buddha's Order are the 8 types of individuals: the one striving to Enter the Stream of the Noble Path, the one who has entered the Stream; the one striving to attain the position of Once-Returner, the Once-Returner; the one striving to reach the Non- returner position, the Non-Returner; the one striving for Arhathship and the Arhath*

[12] *Wandering ascetic*

[13] *A monastic college (similar to a seminary) for the education of Buddhist priests in Sri Lanka. These have also been the centers of secondary and higher education in ancient times for lay people*

[14] *Consecrations to the order of the Sangha for its common use*

[15] *Property, facilities or other objects consecrated to the order of the Sangha for its common use*

[16] *Offering alms and other requisites to the order of the Sangha*

[17] *The two chief disciples of the Buddha*

[18] *Someone on the path to liberation and aspiring to be a Buddha*